

Hetero-ever-after: Homonormative happiness for gay and lesbian characters on US
network television towards and after Marriage Equality.

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Abstract

The Supreme Court's decision on Marriage Equality legalised same sex marriage across the United States, and marked the culmination of decades of legal struggle, political partisanship and social activism. This thesis examines how network television has used same sex marriage as a happy ending for its gay and lesbian characters, and how this perpetuates a narrative that Marriage Equality signifies a happy ending for the LGBTQ rights movement.

By using theories from cultural, sociological and economic fields this thesis constructs network television as neoliberal, and examines its output not just as an artistic product, but as a reflection of the political positions of its audiences and its financiers. By drawing on the works of Sara Ahmed and Lisa Duggan, this work argues that the connections made between marriage and happiness, privilege homonormativity as happiness causing and casts queerness as the source of gay unhappiness. The programmes analysed portray their characters' problems as solved by marriage, reinforcing the idea of Marriage Equality as a solution to the problems of the LGBTQ community. However, as the political landscape has changed, so has the way network television engages with gay and lesbian unhappiness, allowing space for its gay characters to experience unhappiness as an impetus for political action.

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Introduction

Marriage Equality defines a generational shift in how gay people live their lives in the USA. The Supreme Court's decision to legalise same sex marriages across the United States was the culmination of a decades long to-and-fro between progressive states exercising their rights to marry same sex couples within their state constitutions, conservative groups lobbying to overturn those decisions, and the political right working to explicitly legislate against same-sex marriages. As gay marriage rights were granted and revoked numerous times at the state level: the passing of DOMA (the Defence of Marriage Act) in 1996 took the debate to the federal level, ensuring that even if a state granted same sex couples the right to marry, those couples would not receive the same federal benefits as heterosexual couples. DOMA defined marriage on a federal level as between one man and one woman, and allowed states to refuse to recognise same sex marriages performed legally in other states. In 2011, Barack Obama declared DOMA to be unconstitutional, and instructed the Department of Justice to stop defending the law. This decision provided precedent for several challenges to same sex marriage bans at the state level, with ten more states legalising same sex marriage over the next two years. This momentum culminated in the Supreme Court's decision on Marriage Equality in 2015 which reversed the effects of DOMA and restored federal benefits to same sex married couples - enshrining the rights of same sex couples to marry across the USA into the constitution (Deschamps & Singer, 2017).

Same sex marriage rights were a public priority for several gay rights groups and campaigners. Organisations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and GLAAD which received high profile support from celebrities and politicians, contributed to making marriage equality a zeitgeist issue in the early half of the 2010s. Such organisations and campaigns like NOH8 which specifically focussed on reversing Proposition 8 which banned same sex marriage in California, were criticised by more radical groups, who believed that the focus on marriage equality eclipsed less photogenic issues like LGBTQ homelessness, AIDS research, or the murders of trans individuals.

This tension between groups focussed on gaining access to institutions like marriage or the military, and more radical groups who rejected assimilationist techniques has been a long standing feature of the gay rights movement. This tension has been pinpointed as a flaw in the strategy of the movement, with the continued focus on assimilation as a reason why the movement had failed to gain significant traction earlier in its inception, when groups

such as the Mattachine Society and the Gay Liberation Front held these differing opinions on how the movement should proceed (Engel, 2001).

In this thesis I explore how the Marriage Equality decision of 2015, and the prioritisation of marriage rights by mainstream LGBTQ rights campaigns in the years leading up to the decision, have influenced representations of gay and lesbian happiness on US network television. I discuss how connections are made between marriage, happiness and endings, and how through these connections, marriage has become a common “happy ending” for gay characters in network programming. I will ask whether these representations of happiness contribute to a wider idea that Marriage Equality forms a happy ending for the LGBTQ rights campaign as a whole, and that access to marriage is the solution for all gay problems. I will draw from Sara Ahmed’s work interrogating the concept of happiness in order to understand how marriage is tied to happiness and how happiness can be restrictive and work against fights for equality. I will argue that network television works to reinforce the connections between marriage and happiness, and that this connection is specific to its gay and lesbian characters, echoing Ahmed’s construction of happiness as a “straightening device” by placing gay and lesbian identities into a neoliberal frame which demands assimilation and homonormativity in exchange for the possibility of a happy life, and a happy ending.

Whilst there has been plenty of research into representations of gay and lesbian characters on television, and how these representations have changed over time (Becker, 2006; Tropiano, 2002; Streitmatter, 2009), and work interrogating the valorisation of same sex marriage rights within the LGBTQ rights movement (Kirsch, 2000; Conrad, 2014, Duggan, 2002), this thesis more specifically examines the intersection of television, economics and politics, working to analyse how network representations of gayness are influenced not only by shifts in public opinion, but by political history and the networks’ economic model. Canonical texts such as Becker’s *Gay TV and Straight America* provide a historical reading of gay and lesbian representations, showing how the USA’s changing political and social landscape affected how gay people were shown on the small screen. This thesis draws from such work, arguing that television is influenced by the society of its time, but also suggests that television works to influence society to perhaps the same extent. This work views television as not just a mirror to society, or an instrument of social change, but rather both – simultaneously trying to capture public opinion and working to change it, intentionally or not. Furthermore, this thesis uses Ahmed’s work on happiness as a lens through which to view these network gay and lesbian characters. Ahmed’s work has been applied to

television before (Brady, Burns & Davis, 2018), but not from a television studies perspective, and not in the specific context of marriage equality.

This thesis responds to arguments surrounding the use of assimilationist tactics in the LGBTQ rights movement, and asks whether equality is truly won if it exists only under the requirement of adherence to heterosexual and patriarchal institutions. The work also interacts with questions around the extent to which television influences and is influenced by society, and to what lengths historical and political context can be seen in fictional representations of gay and lesbian characters. By interrogating the connections between happiness and marriage, this thesis also engages with queer critiques of same sex marriage and its prioritisation within the movement, alongside feminist critiques of the privileging of marriage as a tool of patriarchal capitalism.

To understand the significance of Marriage Equality one must first understand what “marriage” means to the gay and lesbian community¹. R. Claire Snyder writes in *Gay Marriage and Democracy*:

When lesbians and gay men struggle politically for the right to marry, they are seeking the state sanctioned civil contract that guarantees a significant set of legal benefits to married couples, ones that help them take care of each other financially (health insurance, tax benefits, retirement planning) and support each other during difficult times (medical decision making, family and bereavement leave, “spousal privilege” in the courtroom), as well as enable them to provide for their children (second-parent adoption, child custody and visitation in cases of divorce, Social Security survivorship benefits). The political struggle for same-sex marriage is not about the religious rite. (2006, 15)

Snyder claims here that marriage’s legal and economic benefits are the primary reason for the LGBTQ community’s fight for same sex marriage. In a country where healthcare is fully privatised and legal marriage could provide access to that healthcare, marriage rights can often mean life or death. One can easily see how, after the destruction wrought by the AIDS crisis, healthcare access and the ability to share that access with one’s partner would become a primary concern for the community. The relative lack of rights and privileges

¹ Though Marriage Equality impacted the LGBTQ community as a whole, this thesis focuses more specifically on its connections with the gay and lesbian sections of that community. Of course, these umbrella terms cover a wide range of diverse identities. Here they are used generally to describe those whose relationships are primarily same sex.

afforded by civil partnerships, for example, would have come into sharp relief when visiting a loved one in hospital and surviving a partner's early death had become common shared experiences for gay men and trans individuals in the USA. A legally married couple can share health insurance, they are each other's automatic next of kin, they are entitled to visitation rights in hospital and to benefits after surviving their spouse. Practically then, marriage means the potential for stability and security in the face of disease and death. The 2015 Supreme Court decision ensured that said stability was available nationwide, significantly changing the way that gay couples interacted with the legal system and the government.

Such benefits however are only truly a reality for those whose class and race already provide a level of financial security. A gay man may only use his husband's healthcare package if his husband has health insurance to begin with – an ideal which is often out of reach for many outside of the white middle class (Conrad, 2014). What else then provides the basis for the push for Marriage Equality? Alongside economic and legal benefits, marriage also holds symbolic value. Snyder includes in her list of components of marriage "the community recognized relationship" (2006, 15). Marriage, begun with a wedding, recognises a relationship in front of family and friends. The government sanctioning of a marriage recognises said relationship at a federal level. For weddings performed in a religious setting, marriages are recognised by God. This recognition acknowledges not only the commitment that the couple is making to each other, but also the very existence and legitimacy of their relationship. When two people get married, they often affirm their commitment to their community by celebrating with a wedding. The significance of a public display of affection and commitment, witnessed, acknowledged, and celebrated by the community, is particularly stark when discussed in terms of homosexuality, which is historically associated with secrecy and shame. Specifically for the USA, where fourteen states still have laws against sodomy in their statutes, the ability to not just be openly gay, but to have a gay relationship sanctioned by the state, celebrated by one's community and, in some cases, even blessed by the church, signifies a final casting off of the closet, with gay relationships being legally held to the same standards as their straight counterparts.

The concept of marriage as a lasting acknowledgement of the legitimacy of gay relationships, and gay love itself, also creates some problems. It is clear that for many gay people, Marriage Equality has not made the closet disappear. For those gay people whose communities are not supportive, whose geography, class, or race make living their lives openly difficult, it is unclear whether Marriage Equality has had a positive effect, or

whether the federal decision to legalise same sex marriage (and overrule states' rights) has in effect worsened the homophobia they encounter by having homosexuality encroach upon what was formerly an exclusively heterosexual institution (Stanley, 2014).

Finally, marriage marks a commitment to a future life together. In performing a wedding and committing to a marriage, one therefore acknowledges the existence of a future. Future is not something often afforded to gay people in popular culture. While gay characters in the movies were dying of AIDS (*Philadelphia*, *Rent*), being beaten to death in a hate crime (*Brokeback Mountain*), or committing suicide (*The Hours*), TV characters were shown too briefly to have a narrative arc at all – acting as occasional comic relief or “very special episode” morality lessons before disappearing from the programme entirely (Becker, 2006, 182). Same sex marriage then, not only promises a future, it celebrates the existence of a gay future, of a long, gay, life not cut short by illness or violence, and of a lasting gay relationship, contravening stereotypes of gay promiscuity and hook-up culture.

I have chosen to review representations of gay and lesbian happiness in network television, specifically because of the medium's relationship with its audience. As networks are funded by advertisers, their existence depends on audience satisfaction (Anderson, 2005, 77). In order to be successful, networks must create content that generates mass viewership. Creators pitching programming to a network must be able to prove that their show will draw in viewers from across various demographics and appease advertisers who are careful to maintain their brand's integrity. This business model puts network television in a precarious place; its products must have mass appeal and be inoffensive enough for people of all walks of life and political persuasions to enjoy, but must also be new and interesting enough to capture audience attentions in an ever growing landscape of televisual choice. Network television cannot afford to be niche or controversial, it must find a safe space between conservative mass appeal and forward thinking boundary breaking. If the networks stay too safe, they risk losing audience numbers to premium cable channels, or now to streaming services, which are less regulated and whose business models allow for programming with narrower target audiences. However, taking too many chances or pushing too many boundaries risks the networks losing their hold on the American family, and losing advertiser dollars, and confidence in the process (Becker, 2006). I argue that this tension between conservatism and progressivism positions network television in a neoliberal space, with its economic model prioritising capitalism above all else, and its revenue relying on content which sits comfortably between the political aisles. As further examined in Chapter Two, I argue that a neoliberal contextualisation of network television

allows for a specific reading of how the medium approaches its gay characters. The introduction of gay narratives onto network television came about during the onset of paid cable channels such as HBO and Showtime using gay narratives to add shock value to their schedule to draw viewers away from safe, wholesome network channels. Networks had to prove themselves to be contemporary and show they weren't being left behind in order to win back the viewers from pay cable, and win over gay audiences who were fast becoming attractive to advertisers because of their supposed affluence and trendsetter status (Becker, 2006).

Network television, because of its economic dependency on mass spectrum audience satisfaction and its reliance on creating what it thinks the USA as a whole is interested in watching, becomes a useful barometer of public opinion (Mills, 2006). Not only does network television reflect shifts in culture, by creating programming intended to appeal to audiences across the US and refrain from causing offence, but it also influences such shifts, allowing audiences to familiarise themselves with sections of society they may not have any direct experience of. In terms of gay and lesbian representation, network television has a storied history of how it presented homosexuality on its screens. As discussed by Stephen Tropiano, the inclusion of gay characters and gay storylines on US television began in the 1960s with documentary programming seeking to inform audiences about the existence of homosexuality and went through several phases in fictional representations of gay characters; a spate of gay storylines in the 1970s on medical dramas where homosexuality was often treated as a medical complaint, a trend in 70s police procedurals which featured female police officers accused of lesbianism, AIDS focused storylines during the 1980s, and a shift to more nuanced portrayals of gay lead characters in the 1990s. Throughout these earlier periods in gay representation, television focused on gayness as tragedy, as a problem to be solved, a medical illness or a mental health issue, a threat to one's career, as a cause of isolation, sickness, and, ultimately, death. Programming portraying gay victims of HIV and AIDS often explored how homophobia affected the treatment such characters received and "openly criticised the American health care system for allowing the gay stigma attached to the disease to affect the quality of care being offered to AIDS patients." (Tropiano, 2002, 33). Such characters were shown as not only victims of a physical disease, which at the time was intrinsically linked to homosexuality, but also as victims of discrimination, their gayness condemning them to an early death in more ways than one. Through these early representations, gayness became linked to sadness and tragedy, and straightness was reinforced as a bringer of happiness and security.

The change from these earlier tragic representations of homosexuality, to more superficially positive representations of gay characters in sitcoms in the 1990s is indicative of the popularisation of identity politics in the US during that time. The US shifted from an “American Creed” approach to national identity, which valorised sameness under the banner of American citizenship, to ideas of the “American Melting Pot” which celebrated individual differences (Becker, 2016). This shift in how Americans viewed their national identity, alongside strides in LGBTQ rights, contributed to changes in how gay people were seen by certain demographics. Becker writes about the “SLUMPY” audience (Socially Liberal Urban Minded Professionals) which fast became a desirable demographic for networks to attract because of their trendsetter status and their increased disposable income. This market was largely made up of young people, who now saw it as “cool” to be accepting of gay people, and saw tolerance of homosexuality as proof that they were a modern, radical generation, who had moved on from the culture of their parents:

Gay material wasn’t only useful for network executives... but also for many viewers for whom watching prime-time TV with a gay twist spoke to specific political values and offered some a convenient way to establish a “hip” identity. (Becker, 2006, 105)

Gay content was now a way to indicate that a network was modern and cool, and a way for audiences to signal that they too were fashionably liberal minded. Of course, this sentiment did not apply to the US public as a whole, but the gay friendly(ier) attitudes of the desirable SLUMPY audience provided reason enough for networks to risk showing more gay content on their screens. If such a shift in American politics and cultural identification can have such an impact on gay representations in the 1990s – with hit sitcoms such as *Friends* featuring gay side characters, and programmes such as *Ellen* and later *Will & Grace* foregrounding gay leads – it follows that the landmark Marriage Equality legislation, may also have had an impact on how networks present gay and lesbian characters in their programming.

Shifts in how gay and lesbian characters are presented in network television can also be attributed to changes in the television landscape in the 2010s. It is important to note that whilst the campaign for Marriage Equality intensified, the television industry was also reacting to the popularisation of streaming services – particularly Netflix – and their first forays into original programming. In much the same way as paid cable channels such as HBO and Showtime put pressure on the networks to introduce more socially progressive content and take more risks in order to retain their audience share, the early success of Netflix’s original programming prompted network television to rethink their approach to

both their content and their business model. For example, Netflix's success with rebooting *Arrested Development* years after the original series was cancelled started a trend in nostalgic reboots of old series in network television with new seasons of shows such as *The X Files*, *Prison Break*, *24*, and *Heroes*, appearing on America's screens (Jenner, 2018). *Will & Grace*'s new season falls into this trend, with networks focusing their attention on series with built-in audiences to minimise risk and attempt to guarantee a level of commercial success.

The economic model of streaming services also allows for the production of niche content with a lower commercial risk, as Netflix discerns a programme's success from the amount of new service users it generates, rather than focusing solely on individual views. Streaming services are also free from advertiser interference, so are more able to take bigger risks with their content to appeal to niche audiences who may not see themselves represented on network television. The critical and commercial success of *Orange Is the New Black*, and the critical lauding of its focus on black and Latina women, queer women, and the lower class – characters who were not often featured on network or prestige television – contributed to Netflix's branding as a home for diverse content. Faced with the threat that the streaming boom may pull viewers away from traditional ways of viewing television, by offering more representation, alongside freedom and choice to watch whenever and wherever one wants, the networks increased diversity in their programming by including more gay and lesbian characters, as well as prioritising racial diversity in casting and programming. This is important to keep in mind whilst examining the changes in gay and lesbian representation on network television during the 2010s.

I will argue that the impact of Marriage Equality legislation can be seen in the ways in which network television presents gay and lesbian happiness. Networks find themselves in the position of having to include gay and lesbian characters in their programming – to draw in gay audiences and maintain their relevance in modern culture – and of having to present those characters as something other than the tragic stereotypes of the 60s, 70s and 80s. Networks must find a way to include gay characters enough to appeal to young audiences who demand diversity from their programming, bring in the “pink pound” to their advertisers and lend their shows a sense of cultural cache, present those characters as “positive” enough for lobby groups such as GLAAD to approve of their programming, but

also avoid presenting those characters as “too gay”² so that conservative audiences don’t change the channel, and conservative advertisers don’t pull their funding. Networks have to find a way to make gay characters acceptable to audiences across the USA, including those who hold socially conservative views. I will argue that Marriage Equality provided the perfect solution to this problem, allowing networks to present a neoliberal version of gay happiness, which falls in line with existing American values and therefore poses no threat to heteronormative institutions, or conservatively minded audiences.

I use Duggan’s account of “homonormativity” to explore how marriage is used by network television to allow for happy representations of gay and lesbian characters on its programmes. I position network television as neoliberal, which leads it to condemn anti-gay sentiments and reject gay radicalism in equal measure. It pushes gay characters into homonormative structures, with an aim to assimilating gay characters into straight narratives, rather than exploring and celebrating gayness in and of itself. I argue that this prizing of homonormativity, and its reinforced connections with happiness, works to placate the LGBTQ rights movement, and perpetuate the narrative of Marriage Equality as a happy ending, papering over the continual problems that gay and lesbian Americans still face.

I have chosen to focus on four network television programmes which featured gay and lesbian characters and same sex marriages in the lead up to and after the Supreme Court decision on Marriage Equality. I have chosen these programmes – *Glee*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and the 2018 revival series of *Will & Grace* – because they represent a wide range of networks and genres. *Glee* is a musical comedy drama which aired on the conservative owned Fox network and was aimed towards a teen or young adult audience. Medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* and soapy legal thriller *How to Get Away with Murder* air on ABC which is owned by Disney, and are aimed towards a female market. *Will & Grace* is a classic half hour, multi-camera sitcom which airs on the more liberal branded network NBC. By using a breadth of works which cross genres and channels, I hope to show that my findings are specific to network television as a whole, rather than to any specific genre or channel.

² When NBC cancelled *Ellen*, their reasoning was not that she was gay but that she- and the programme were “too gay”. Then CEO Robert Iger is quoted as saying “It became a programme about a lead character who was gay every single week. And I just think that was too much for people” (Brady, Burns & Davies, 2018, 20-21)

In Chapter One, I focus on the connections between happiness, marriage and happy endings, drawing from Ahmed's explanation of happiness as a social construct, used by a patriarchal, heteronormative society to keep its citizens following the same paths and working towards the same goals. I discuss how happiness and endings are linked, analysing how *Will & Grace* retracted the happy endings of its characters from its original series in order to reboot the show and continue their storylines. I also look at how *Glee* used marriage as a happy ending for its gay and lesbian characters in its final season and how the episode's political overtones contributed to the construction of Marriage Equality as a happy ending for the LGBT rights movement.

In Chapter Two, I analyse two representations of marriage and weddings from *Grey's Anatomy* – the same sex marriage of Callie and Arizona, and the starkly different portrayal of marriage seen in the almost wedding of Christina and Burke. I again employ Ahmed's work to position Callie as the queer child attempting to prove to her parents that her bisexuality can coincide with their heterosexually sanctioned ideals of happiness. I contrast this portrayal of a wedding as a uniquely happy event, with the failed wedding of Christina and Burke to show that the connections made between weddings, marriage and happiness are often restricted to a programme's gay and lesbian characters, with weddings often being employed as a source of drama and conflict for a programme's heterosexual couples.

In Chapter Three, I interrogate the differences between gayness and queerness and examine whether former representations of tragic gay characters on television have been replaced by tragic queer characters, referring to both Tropiano's and Becker's work which provide historical context of gay and lesbian visibility on television. I use Goltz's concept of the "good gay" to discuss whether the bonds between marriage, happiness and homonormativity, tie queerness to unhappiness and therefore promote conformity and assimilation as routes to happiness and salvation.

Finally, in Chapter Four I will examine how the shift in US politics towards a far right ideology and the resulting uncertainty for the LGBTQ community in the Trump era, disrupts the concept of Marriage Equality as a happy ending, and can be connected to the increase in political engagement from formerly apolitical network television programmes. I will again draw from Ahmed to discuss how queer unhappiness can act as an impetus for social change, and how it is therefore important for representations of queer unhappiness to be seen in network television.

Chapter One: Marriage, Happiness and Happy Endings

This chapter examines the concept of happiness, how happiness is tied to endings and how marriage has become linked to the idea of a happy ending in narratives, on television, and in society. I outline Sara Ahmed's work on happiness and focus on how marriage has been used as an end point for characters on network television. I examine how the use of marriage to signify a happy ending for same sex characters on network television mirrors the homonormative idea that the legalisation of same sex marriage may mark an end to the LGBTQ rights movement, providing a "happily ever after" for both fictional and real life gays and lesbians. I discuss how the revival series of *Will & Grace* dismantled its character's happy endings in order to bring the series back to the screen, and how *Glee* used same sex marriage to end the storylines of all of its gay and lesbian characters in one episode of its final season. Ultimately, I will establish a link between happiness, endings and marriage, and discuss how this link is seen in network gay and lesbian representations, in a post marriage equality USA.

In her work *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed explores the concept of happiness as a cultural construction, as a performative action or elusive incentive for social conformity rather than any kind of immutable good or universally felt emotion. For Ahmed, happiness – and the prescriptive obsession with attaining happiness – acts as a form of social pressure, orienting citizens towards certain culturally acceptable goals and maintaining a communal façade of "okay-ness" as people strive to reach a point of happiness within their lives, whilst also refusing to admit they are not already happy.

Ahmed pinpoints three components to the concept of happiness:

Happiness involves affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgement (to be happy about something makes something good). If happiness creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods. (2010, 22)

Here happiness is tied with goodness, as being happy about something, or having been made happy by something, in turn ascribes a moral goodness onto that object, and assumes that it will then make others happy in the same way. In this way, society values certain actions as happiness causing, and therefore as "good". Ahmed describes this process as circular:

Certain objects are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means they already circulate as social goods before we “happen” upon them, which is why we might happen upon them in the first place. (2010, 28)

Instead of finding their own happiness by chance, people pursue that which society has determined will make them happy. Individuals may already predict what will cause their happiness before they encounter it themselves. Happiness then becomes directed, orienting people towards specific, culturally designated goals with the promise of fulfilment once those goals are attained. This creates a communal agreement on what brings happiness, an agreement which is difficult to break for fear of shattering the happiness illusion.

Ahmed also describes happiness as directional: “When we follow things we aim for happiness, as if happiness is what you get if you reach certain points” (2010, 26). People spend their lives seeking out what will make them happy, whether that be physical objects; food, clothes, books; activities; exercise, sex, travel; or states of being; parenthood, love, financial stability. Happiness, then, is a goal, a target to aim one’s life towards, and a fuel, an incentive to push people to reach those goals. Happiness works as both the carrot and the stick, moving people to where they think they want to be.

In her chapter on *The Unhappy Queer*, Ahmed describes these “happiness scripts” as “straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up” (2010, 91). In this way happiness is not only directional but also directive. Happiness tells people what to do with their lives and how to spend their time. Individuals follow happiness wherever it takes them, and assume that where it takes them is for the best. Happiness is associated with goodness, an action that makes someone happy must be a good action. Certain actions are shown to cause happiness in others so they must cause happiness in oneself. Certain happiness scripts are tied to the idea of living a good life – marriage, children, and financial success – and a life without those milestones is feared as a life that must be fundamentally unhappy.

If then, happiness is tied with goodness, then unhappiness is tied to badness. A life which does not follow the standard happiness scripts is unhappy, and therefore bad. People do not want to live a bad life, therefore they must follow the instructions for happiness. This mechanism ensures people follow a set of rules for their lives which comply with the status quo, encouraging people to follow the same paths as everyone who came before them.

Happiness secures conformity, demanding an adherence to the rules for fear of admitting one's unhappiness, one's badness.

Ahmed's description of happiness as a "straightening device" also points to happiness as a tool of heteronormativity. Happiness straightens, not only towards the status quo – towards capitalism and societal norms – but also towards a kind of straightness that is implicit in that status quo – that of heterosexuality. Happiness scripts – ways of generating happiness – line up to heterosexual social values. Ahmed points to marriage as "one of the primary happiness indicators" in the introduction to *The Promise of Happiness*:

Marriage would be defined as "the best of all possible worlds" as it maximises happiness. The argument is simple: if you are married, then we can predict that you are more likely to be happier than if you are not married. The finding is also a recommendation: get married and you will be happier! (2010, 6)

As referenced in my introduction, marriage provides legal, financial, and social benefits to those who participate in it, therefore reinforcing the idea of marriage as a cause of happiness. Traditionally, marriage has also been reserved for heterosexual couples, generating an image of the celebration of heterosexual love and commitment over that of same sex couples or polyamorous arrangements. Marriage and heterosexuality are inextricably linked, so when directed towards marriage as a happiness indicator we are also directed towards heterosexuality. The recommendation "get married and you will be happier!" can also be read as "be heterosexual and you will be happier!" In this way, happiness directs us towards straightness, and therefore away from queerness. Queerness becomes the state of unhappiness we aim to escape from by achieving heterosexuality, by straightening, and attaining happiness.

This scepticism of marriage as a happiness bringer is echoed in Lisa Duggan's work on "The New Homonormativity", in which Duggan criticises the neoliberal leanings of the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement and its laser focus on marriage rights. This criticism shares its roots with Ahmed's work in doubting the connections between marriage and happiness. Duggan too identifies the risks in embracing happiness, and eschewing unhappiness. Where Ahmed sees a recommendation of "get married and you will be happier!", Duggan sees a resignation of "go[ing] home and cook[ing] dinner, forever" (2002, 189). Duggan's "new homonormativity" is in many ways the result of Ahmed's construction of happiness as a "straightening device". For Duggan, the prioritisation of marriage as a source of gay and lesbian happiness is tantamount to a placation of gay and

lesbian anger, and a de-queering of the movement – an argument which Ahmed explores in her chapter on “The Unhappy Queer”. I explore Duggan’s work further in chapter two, but will herein use her term “homonormative” to refer to gay and lesbian constructs that mirror those of heteronormative society, or in other ways bolster the aspirational nature of heterosexual paradigms for gay and lesbian individuals.

After the Supreme Court decision on Marriage Equality in 2015, marriage was no longer only reserved for heterosexual relationships. Marriage – and its many benefits- became accessible across the US for same sex couples, allowing them to be directed towards happiness in the same way as heterosexual couples. In the statement on the ruling from *Obergefell vs Hodges*, the Supreme Court stated:

From their beginning to their most recent page, the annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage. The lifelong union of a man and a woman always has promised nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life. Marriage is sacred to those who live by their religions and offers unique fulfilment to those who find meaning in the secular realm. Its dynamic allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons. Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations.

(*Obergefell v Hodges*, 2015)

Same-sex couples won the right to marry in part because of marriage’s relationship to happiness. The Supreme Court was not only granting gay people the right to marry, but also the right to nobility, dignity and hope through marriage. The presumption here is that, because marriage has often brought happiness to heterosexual couples, homosexual people must be afforded access to that happiness in the same way. There is no reference to divorce, to domestic violence, to arranged or forced marriages, or any other of the myriad of ways that marriage may in fact bring unhappiness. Marriage is instead categorised as a happiness bringer, so to continue denying marriage to same sex couples would be tantamount to denying gay people the right to happiness itself.

With marriage defined as a bringer of happiness, happiness is also tied to the idea of a life goal, of a milestone, of something to aim for. The Declaration of Independence declares the USA to be committed to the idea that its citizens are endowed with the god given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The US was founded not on the right to

happiness itself, but on the right to pursue it. Americans are not existing in a state of happiness, rather they are chasing it. In order to be in pursuit of happiness, one must currently not be in possession of it. One must be unhappy.

If the state of happiness requires unhappiness to exist, it also requires us to eschew unhappiness in favour of the pursuit of happiness. Working towards happiness means working away from unhappiness. Unhappiness becomes a starting point for improvement. If unhappiness is the start then happiness must be the end.

Happiness and endings are linked both culturally and narratively. The phrase “happily ever after”, learned in childhood from fairy tales and story books, gives an idea of happiness as everlasting once it has been attained. Happiness is for “ever”. The state of happiness, once achieved is permanent. We need no further explanation of a story’s ending; the characters are happy and continue to be so, presumably for the rest of their lives. Once happiness is secured, it becomes a safe state of being where unhappiness cannot reappear. A happy ending provides happiness for life.

Happiness is also “after”. Happiness is what one gets when one finishes. It comes after, but after what? After unhappiness, after struggle, after the story. Happiness must be the end, so that “happily ever” can be “after”. It cannot be after if the story continues and it cannot be forever if the story keeps going. A happy ending signifies the end of a struggle, the end of disruption. Happiness lasts forever after the story ends because for there to be a story there must be disruption, there must be a break in the equilibrium, and this is incompatible with happiness.

Happiness here is again linked with marriage, as many of the stories, fairy tales and folklores which popularised the phrase “happily ever after” also end with a wedding. In these stories, marriage – or a marriage symbolised by a wedding – indicates that the heroine’s hardships are now over, that she is free of the troubles that plagued her during the story, and will now be happy forever.

In television, narrative conventions are built into genres, and the happy ending is a common feature in network schedules. For example, a sitcom is recognisable by its recurring characters, comical misunderstandings and guarantee of a happy ending:

No matter the conflict, resolution and a return to happiness were guaranteed: each week the narrative would return the characters to the same situation and frame of

mind with which they began – they would learn nothing new, and would neither change nor grow. (Henry, 2003, 265)

In each episode of a sitcom, equilibrium is disrupted, causing conflict which is later resolved. This structure extends to the series as a whole, ensuring that the ending of a sitcom will always be a happy one. This happiness is often signified by a wedding, or at least the coming together of the central “will they won’t they” couple (presuming the series is allowed to end on its own terms). These genre conventions further tie marriage to the idea of a happy ending, and are often a feature of network television (Mills, 2005). *Friends* for example, ensured that all of its characters were either married, or on their way to being married by the end of its final season, giving Phoebe a magical outdoor wedding to Mike, and reuniting Ross and Rachel. The obvious exception here is Joey, who remains single at the end of the finale, ready to continue to pursue his happiness in his eponymous spin off.

That said, weddings – as a symbols of marriage – are often employed as sources of drama or conflict, more so in some genres than others. In soap opera for example, the audience knows that during any episode featuring a wedding, something is bound to go wrong – a character may interrupt the ceremony, someone may be jilted at the altar, a secret may be revealed which threatens the couple’s relationship, and in many cases, a character may die. However, this use of a wedding as the setting for melodrama in some ways reinforces the connection between marriage and happiness. The soap opera trope of a wedding gone wrong works precisely because weddings are expected to be happy events. The drama is caused by the disruption of this happiness, by the undermining of expectations.

Friends also featured episodes where weddings and marriages went wrong. In fact, the series’ “situation” is borne out of a failed wedding, with Rachel leaving her fiancé at the altar and running into Monica and the rest of the gang in her wedding dress. Also foregrounded in the pilot episode is Ross’ failed marriage to Carol who has left him for another woman. Ross’ inability to succeed in marriage is a running joke in the series, with him marrying and divorcing several times. In *The One with Phoebe’s Husband* the friends discover that Phoebe is married to a gay Canadian ice dancer who needed a Green Card. The episode centres around his request for a divorce because he has since realised that he is in fact not gay, and wants to marry another woman. Ross’ wedding to Emily is disastrous, with all of their plans falling through and their venue in the process of being demolished. Ross’ attempts to save the wedding almost pay off, before he says Rachel’s name in his

vows instead of Emily's. These unsuccessful weddings and broken marriages create conflict for the characters, and comedic moments for the audience, but ultimately pave the way for the characters to find their true happiness in marrying "the right person". Ross and Emily's wedding had to go wrong in order for Ross and Rachel to reconcile in the end. The various weddings throughout the series are used as road blocks to extend the "will they won't they" storyline until the final season, so that Ross and Rachel can live happily ever after.

Will & Grace's initial eight season run, which frequently aired alongside *Friends* in NBC's famous Thursday night "Must See TV" line-up, also focused on a group of friends living in New York City and trying to find love. *Will & Grace* also starts with a central female character rejecting a marriage, as Grace is proposed to by her boyfriend but ultimately turns him down. The eight seasons after this show Will and Grace entering into various relationships which inevitably fail, until the final season where the two main characters either get married or settle into a committed relationship. In the series finale, a flash-forward showed Grace, married to long standing "will they, won't they" love interest Leo, and Will, in a committed long term relationship with partner Vince, raising children together who decades later meet at college and are set up as love interests themselves. Karen and Jack also end up in a kind of marriage, living together with Karen's long suffering maid Rosario. This ending ensured audiences knew that Will and Grace's lives after the programme ended were happy ones, showing viewers that both characters found long lasting love, had children, and ultimately remained good friends. By implying a romantic relationship between Will and Grace's respective children, the programme also provided a sense of closure to the show's concept – that Will and Grace would make the perfect couple, if it weren't for Will's homosexuality. This aspect of the series finale implied that at least a part of Will and Grace would finally get together in the end.

The season finale of *Will & Grace* aired in 2006, nine years before Marriage Equality was achieved in the US. In 2018, three years after Obergefell vs Hodges, the programme returned to NBC with a revival series, starring the same cast over a decade later. This revival series used the cold open of its pilot to erase the events of the 2006 finale, in order to set its characters back to similar starting points as they were in the first series. In this, Karen wakes from a drunken daydream and is told by Will, Grace and Jack that Grace never had Will's baby, Will never raised a child with Vince, and all of this was just a product of her intoxicated imagination.

Karen: What happened to the children you had who grew up and got married to each other?

Will: That never happened.

Karen: What a relief! No one wants to see you two raise kids!

Jack: Yeah, what would be funny about that?

(Will & Grace: 11 Years Later, 2018)

During this exchange Karen and Jack spell out for the audience the decision to wipe certain parts of the previous finale's narrative from existence. The line "No one wants to see you two raise kids" works as an in character barb from Karen about Will and Grace's lack of parenting skills, and as a meta comment about a perceived lack of interest in a "Will and Grace as parents" storyline. This is further underlined by Jack's "What would be funny about that?" emphasising the difficulty the show might have in finding humour in what is generally seen as a happy state of being.

This "meta" approach continues later in the scene when Will gives Karen a brief summing up of events:

Will: You're rich. Stan's alive. Both single. No kids.

(Will & Grace: 11 Years Later, 2018)

Jack then looks directly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall and speaks directly to Grace (who has been tasked with taking a candid photo at an opportune moment) and the audience:

Jack: Got it?

(Will & Grace: 11 Years Later, 2018)

(See Fig.1)

Through thinly disguising this moment of audience instruction, the show manages to explain away the absurdity of wiping previous events from history with a knowing nod and wink to its viewers. Instead of working in realistic plot events to counteract the events of the 2006 finale, the revival chooses to retract them completely, in its own version of "it was all a dream". Jack's comment to camera draws attention to their moment of rewriting history, assuring audiences that *Will & Grace* respects their intelligence, and that the show

knows what they want to see from *Will & Grace* – a comedy about two single friends, not a family comedy about raising children.

Whereas Will and Grace's children are erased from existence entirely, both Will's relationship with Vince and Grace's marriage to Leo are upheld. The programme resets these aspects of the finale by explaining that Will's relationship doesn't work out (later attributed to Vince's unwillingness to get married), and Grace and Leo got divorced. Whilst the breakdown of these relationships does to some extent shatter the illusion that a happy ending, once achieved, lasts forever, this turn of events does now allow the characters to work towards that happy ending once again. The audience is able to see the happiness Will had with Vince and Grace had with Leo as something other than the true happiness suggested at the end of the series' first iteration. Instead these relationships are positioned as temporary, and therefore not truly happy. By ending these relationships, *Will & Grace* gives its characters the ability to work towards true happiness again, and gives the audience the pleasure of watching them repeatedly, comically fail to achieve it.

By pushing the reset button on Will and Grace's lives, the programme is able to place the characters back to much the same place as the first series started. Will and Grace are still living together (after Grace suffers a break-up), trying to find love and struggling to find a relationship that lives up to the bond they have with each other. This sets the characters back to a place of striving towards happiness, placing happiness again at the end point, as a driving force behind the character's actions and as something for them to work towards. This is specifically significant for Will's storyline, as he is now – after Marriage Equality - able to aspire towards marriage.

In *Will & Grace* we see that happiness can only be reserved for an ending; the story has been continued so the happy ending must be debunked and written off as a fiction. Happiness and story are incompatible to such an extent that in order to continue telling this story, their previous ending, and their previous happiness must be not only written out of existence, but also ridiculed as absurd. It never happened and it could never have happened. To believe it is ridiculous, so ridiculous in fact that even the characters themselves must speak through the screen to confirm the audience has ridden it from their minds. As Will and Grace's happy endings were signified by their success in finding a romantic partner with whom to spend the rest of their lives – Grace as happily married, and

Will in a long term committed relationship – this incompatibility also extends to marriage³. By insinuating that a story about Will and Grace being happily married would have been unwatchable, *Will & Grace* also implies that the characters could not have been unhappily married either. Instead of choosing to find humour and conflict within the characters' relationships - in Grace and Leo's path to divorce, or Will and Vince's arguing over whether or not to get married - the revival series starts after these relationships have failed – preserving the connections between marriage, happiness and endings.

During the lead up to the Supreme Court's decision on Marriage Equality, this connection between marriage and happy endings became especially significant for gay and lesbian characters on television, with some programmes using their gay and lesbian characters to make political statements in support of legalising same sex marriage. One of these programmes was Ryan Murphy's *Glee*, which despite airing on the famously conservative Fox network, featured several gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans characters in its changing line up over its six seasons. In *Glee*'s 2015 final season, all four of its central gay and lesbian characters get married in the same episode. *A Wedding* focuses on the upcoming nuptials of Brittany and Santana and the various preparations for the ceremony. They are getting married not in their home state of Ohio, but across the state border into Indiana where same sex marriage is legal. During the episode, the programme's other gay couple, Kurt and Blaine, reconcile after a brief separation, and are later convinced to get married at the same time as Brittany and Santana, in a double gay wedding.

A Wedding aired in February 2015, around four months before same sex marriage was legalised across the US. The episode is clearly making a pro- marriage equality statement – there are various speeches throughout about the importance of marriage for everyone, about how brave both the couples are, and a smaller storyline featuring Santana's religious grandmother overcoming her prejudices to attend the ceremony – and the episode's historical context serves to reinforce this message. In contrast, another storyline during the episode features socially awkward Tina deciding to propose to her ex-boyfriend Mike, despite them no longer being in a relationship. The idea is ridiculed as absurd, with her friends sceptical of her logic. Her proposal is rejected, and she realises this absurdity for herself. The programme positions this storyline as comic relief, the audience are supposed

³ One can assume that if same sex marriage had been legal in 2008, Will and Vince would also have married, though it is interesting to note that in the flash forward to Will and Grace's future, Will and Vince remain unmarried. The idea of same sex marriage becoming a reality is not even conceived of, even far enough into the future for Will and Grace's kids to be at college together.

to see Tina's idea as silly and desperate, despite the fact that Kurt and Blaine end up doing the exact thing she proposes. The gay couple's decision to marry on the spur of the moment after a period of separation is exalted as brave and romantically spontaneous. All of their friends are wholly supportive and the adults in their life encourage them – despite every character still being in their late teens. For the straight teenage girl, marriage is a silly whim, a decision she's far too young and naïve to make, and something which will never work out. This double standard reinforces the idea of marriage as a happiness marker for gay characters— a way of showing audiences that gay people can escape their queer unhappiness and move towards a homonormative happiness. By presenting the idea of Tina marrying Mike as ridiculous, but Kurt and Blaine's decision to marry as a sincere expression of their commitment and an unquestionably positive decision, supported by both parties' parents, *Glee* shows that whereas marriage may not be the right choice for every straight couple, it must always be the right choice for gay couples.

Marriage for *Glee* provides a happy ending for all of its gay characters, all at once. In the five subsequent episodes of the series, the gay characters rarely feature, with the other heterosexual characters from the ensemble taking centre stage. Santana, Brittany, Kurt and Blaine's stories are concluded by their weddings. This not only a further reification of the ties between marriage, happiness and endings, but also gestures towards the homonormative concept of access to marriage providing a happy ending for the LGBTQ rights movement as a whole. Assimilative approaches to LGBTQ rights, described by Duggan as homonormative and neoliberal, saw access to existing institutions, such as marriage, as the main goal of the LGBTQ rights movement. (Becker, 2006) (Haider-Markel & Miller, 2017). Many of the arguments used in favour of marriage equality, focused on the access it would give gay people to happiness rather than to financial or practical benefits, making use of slogans such as "love is love" and "love wins" to foreground the romantic aspects of marriage over its legality. Access to marriage would provide gay and lesbian couples the chance to have their own version of "happily ever after", therefore achieving marriage equality would provide a happy ending to decades of struggle for the LGBTQ movement. By explicitly, repeatedly politicising the marriages of Brittany and Santana, and Kurt and Blaine, *Glee* aligns its gay characters' happy endings with that of the whole LGBTQ community. During both couples' wedding vows, each individuals' struggles with homophobic bullying, self-loathing and isolation are mentioned, emphasising that marriage is both the reward they get for surviving queer unhappiness, and their path out of that unhappiness. *Glee's* decision to marry both couples in order to provide them a happy

ending, implies that marriage is the only way to indicate happiness for those couples. It is not enough to merely reconcile Kurt and Blaine, they must get married to show that they will stay together forever.

Happiness is socially constructed, reinforced by circular directivity, pointing people towards what will bring them happiness based on the assumption that what makes others happy will make everyone happy. Individuals may follow these happiness scripts in order to achieve what is socially considered to be a good life. One such happiness script is marriage, which has been tied to the idea of a happy ending throughout narrative history, the two remaining linked in modern network television. The link between marriage and happiness was a strong influence in the Supreme Court's decision to legalise same sex marriage, and the effects of this can be seen in network representations of gay and lesbian characters. In *Will & Grace*, a happy ending involving marriage is scrubbed from memory in order to revive the series and allow for characters to chase happiness once again. In *Glee*, the need to provide the series' gay characters a happy ending coincided with the run up to the Supreme Court's decision, and resulted in a double gay wedding of four teenagers who wholly believed that marriage was the solution to all of their gay problems. In my next chapter I further explore the concept of same-sex marriage as a cure-all for homophobia, and the links between homonormativity and happiness.

Chapter Two: Same Sex Marriage as a Homonormative Happy Ending

This chapter discusses the connection between happiness, same sex marriage and homonormativity, and how marriage equality, positioned as a landmark achievement for the LGBTQ rights movement, is indicative of an adherence to neoliberal ideals and tactics. I expand on the work of Lisa Duggan and explore her definition of homonormativity, specifically relating to same sex marriage. I also contextualise network television in relation to Duggan's explanation of neoliberalism, arguing that networks – because of their specific economic model – are themselves neoliberal and that these politics can then be seen in their content as well as their business practices. Following this I discuss how same sex marriage's use in network television as a happy ending for its gay characters perpetuates a neoliberal, homonormative approach to gay representation, and how the link between marriage and happiness is employed to present marriage as a solution to gay problems⁴. In order to exemplify this I focus specifically on the wedding of Callie and Arizona in medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* and compare the representation of their same sex marriage seen in Season 11's *White Wedding* and the representations of heterosexual marriage shown in both *White Wedding* and Season 3 episode *Didn't We Almost Have It All?*. I continue to draw upon the work of Sara Ahmed, alongside Duggan and Goltz's concept of "good gays" and the "heteronormative court". I explore how the construction of marriage as a happy ending has become specifically tied to gay and lesbian characters on network television as opposed to their heterosexual counterparts, and how this relationship reinforces a shameful narrative of homosexuality, implying that homonormativity is the only route to happiness.

Lisa Duggan's essay "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" outlines the connection between neoliberal politics and the assimilation tactics used by centrist gay and lesbian activist groups. She describes the approach of these groups, such as the IGF (Independent Gay Writers Forum) - as an attempt to mainstream gayness, and eschew intersectional concerns such as racism, poverty and classism, in favour of a de-radicalised approach to gay rights focused on gaining access to culturally entrenched institutions, rather than dismantling them. Duggan argues that the concept of neoliberalism, often thought of as solely economic in its reach, has in fact influenced cultural and sexual politics to perhaps the same extent, and positions assimilationist,

⁴ Gay problems here refers to problems that one experiences specifically because of one's homosexuality, be that homophobia, violence, denial of services, familial rejection, homelessness or struggles with governmental institutions such as difficulty adopting children.

centrist gay and lesbian groups as neoliberal through their distinctions of private and public, of what is within the realms of government oversight, and what must remain free of state interference.

In his introduction to Noam Chomsky's *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, Robert W. McChesney describes neoliberalism as:

the defining political economic paradigm of our time...whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit. (1998, 7)

A neoliberal perspective prioritises the free market above all else. Social good is seen as only producible when capitalism is successful, with the concept of "trickle-down" economics reassuring society that as long as the wealthy get wealthier, eventually everyone will reap the benefits. McChesney posits that neoliberalism has entrenched itself as the only possible form of society by developing a culture of individualism and making democracy increasingly difficult to engage with:

Instead of citizens it [neoliberalism] produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless. (1998, 11)

This disengagement is echoed by Duggan, who describes neoliberalism as "a kind of nonpolitics – a way of being reasonable" (2002, 117). This approach to politics considers itself to be moderate, eschewing the "extremes" of left or right, and instead following a "reasonable" *middle way*. This kind of neoliberal approach gestures towards socially liberal ideas whilst adhering to economic conservatism and continuing to uphold free market capitalism as the ideal. Duggan rejects this claim of neoliberalism's apolitical stance, and implies that neoliberal theories sit closer to that of right wing conservatism than its proponents speak to, specifically due to strategies of "privatisation... the transfer of wealth and decision making from public, more-or-less accountable decision-making bodies to individual or corporate, unaccountable hands". (2002, 178) Duggan suggests that neoliberal privatisation tactics undermine the movement's socially liberal credentials and put marginalised groups at risk by removing the government's obligations to protect those who may be discriminated against, and categorising previously considered public issues of

minority rights and protections, as private matters for which the government takes no responsibility.

One can easily draw parallels between the paradigms of neoliberalism and the space in which US television networks exist. Networks must position themselves as between the political left and right, ensuring never to stray too far in either direction for fear of turning off viewers with contrasting political views. Networks are also privatised capitalist institutions, creating television not for the sake of television itself, but to make money. In order to make their money, networks must exist in a neoliberal space, creating either programming that is superficially apolitical, or enough programming which leans towards either side of the political divide to curate an image of the network that remains believably neutral. This approach allows networks to draw in advertisers from across the political spectrum, and attract cross-demographic audiences across the US to their schedules. This neoliberal approach can be seen in the types of programmes commissioned by the networks, and in the content of those programmes which is often controlled and censored by network executives who are responsible for maintaining their brand's apolitical image. Through this knock-on effect of network television's economic model into the content of its programming, mass market popular culture is directly influenced by neoliberalism, creating an impression of what is considered to be politically moderate, whilst in fact still adhering to right wing economics.

Duggan's article further suggests a link between neoliberal economic politics and shifts in cultural and sexual politics. She posits that neoliberalism rejects identity politics, in favour of a view of humanity as a homogenised mass, fuelling capitalism and living their own, individual, private lives. For neoliberals whether a person is gay or straight is irrelevant, as long as they contribute to the free market economy:

[The *new homonormativity*] is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (2002, 179)

For neoliberal LGBTQ activist groups, gay and lesbian rights are less about challenging heteronormativity, or questioning a world which privileges heterosexuality, and more about gaining the opportunity to participate in capitalism in the same way as heterosexual citizens. Equality here is less about the right to be one's authentic gay or lesbian self without fear of discrimination – personal or economic – and more about the right to

conform, to be “just like everybody else”. This approach is a practical one, allowing gay and lesbian rights groups to form a connection to the mainstream, aligning themselves with American values of capitalism and privacy, and reassuring the heterosexual majority that the LGBTQ community does not pose a threat to the heteronormative power structure. Duggan describes this approach as “a double voiced address to an imagined gay public, on the one hand, and to the national mainstream constructed by neoliberalism on the other” (2002, 179). This tactic may allow for increased mainstream support of gay rights issues, but it does so through assuming that every gay person wants to be part of the mainstream. This “imagined gay public” leaves little space for those who do not want to conform, or those who cannot conform. It makes no allowances for the ways in which intersectional identities may prove barriers to the mainstream, for those gay and lesbian people who are black, Asian or Hispanic, for those living in poverty, for the disabled or for trans people. Not only are these people left out of the benefits of a neoliberal approach to gay and lesbian rights, they are also left out of the picture of an LGBTQ community that neoliberal activism groups want to present to the mainstream. Instead these identities are erased in favour of white, middle class, affluent and cis-gendered characters, whose only barrier to participating in capitalism is their homosexuality. By positioning gay rights as a simple domestic privacy issue, rather than a civil rights issue, groups such as the IGF hoped to depoliticise the concept of gay equality, making it more palatable for those on both sides of the aisle. The discussion was no longer about tearing down institutions or demanding governmental interventions to secure access, or provide *special interest group* status. It was now less of a fight for recognition, and more of a polite request to stay unrecognised, to keep one’s private life private and to be able to live life like any other heterosexual American.

Duggan is wary that this oversimplification of gay politics and its worship of conservative institutions in fact works against the LGBTQ rights movement:

There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or of an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever. (2002, 189)

By providing access to heteronormative institutions, homonormativity acts as a form of placation, masking the need for more radical queer politics, and encouraging gay and lesbian individuals to settle down their tempers, and settle down into private,

homonormative family life. By prioritising access to institutions such as marriage, neoliberalism reinforces the connections between marriage and happiness, and between same sex marriage and an ending to gay and lesbian struggle. Duggan's "political sedative" suggests that the aligning of LGBTQ equality with marriage rights, is in fact a deliberate political ploy, intended to keep gay and lesbian people from challenging the status quo by making space for them within it.

By prioritising marriage equality as a central goal of the gay and lesbian rights movement, homonormativity not only categorises marriage as the happy ending to all gay and lesbian troubles, but also positions the gay and lesbian community as one which aspires towards heterosexual institutions and therefore heterosexuality itself. This valorising of heterosexuality, reifies the binary opposition of heterosexual as good and aspirational, and homosexual as bad and shameful. Dustin Bradley Goltz uses the concept of a heterosexual courtroom to illustrate how assimilation tactics work against gay rights:

The rhetorical move of pleading normalcy to the heteronormative court seeks to claim access for some gay men within heteronormative temporal scripts, asserting a "good gay" model that continues the tragic punishment of those who fail, refuse, or cannot adopt normative and assimilationist performance. In short, bridging devices work to support and uphold heteronormative mandates, rather than problematize and interrogate heteronormativity's corrupt and oppressive authority. (2010, 84)

By accessing marriage in order to prove their normalcy, gay people reify the homophobic assumption that straightness is the ultimate goal, and that through emulating heterosexual structures gay people are able to be as close to the straight dream as possible. Rather than queering marriage, marriage equality straightens gayness, acting again as Ahmed's "straightening device", encouraging gay and lesbian individuals to toe not only a capitalist, traditionalist line, but also a heterosexual one.

This use of marriage equality as a tool of neoliberal homonormativity can be seen in medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, which boasted the longest running same-sex couple in network television in characters Callie Torres and Arizona Robbins. *Grey's* told Callie's coming out story over several seasons as she realised she was bisexual and started dating other women, but it is her relationship with out lesbian Arizona that prompts Callie to come out to her parents and triggers a storyline which exemplifies network representations of homonormativity. Callie's parents are deeply religious and she encounters a long term struggle with her father Carlos over his refusal to accept her sexuality. In season five

episode *Sweet Surrender*, Callie's father cuts her off both financially and personally when she refuses to return home with him so that he can help straighten her out. Carlos returns again in the season six episode *Invasion*, this time with the family priest in tow in order to try and "pray away the gay". It is in this episode that talk of marriage for Callie and Arizona is first brought up, not between the two women, but during Callie's reconciliation with her father:

Carlos: Listen, if this works out, between you and Arizona, is there a chance that maybe you'd give your mother a wedding?

Callie: If Arizona wanted to spend the rest of her life with me, yeah, I'll put on a big white dress and dance down the aisle.

Carlos: How about grandkids.

Callie: Yes. I would imagine, when the time came, there would be kids.

Carlos: Does she make you happy?

Callie: Yes dad, she makes me very happy.

(*Grey's Anatomy: Invasion*: 2009)

Here Carlos' acceptance of his daughter's sexuality is dependent on her commitment to a future wedding. This is not for her, not to celebrate her relationship or formalise a commitment, but instead for her mother, to make her mother happy. The phrase "give your mother a wedding", is also here specifically referring to the wedding ceremony, not even to a marriage, as Callie had previously eloped with a man – George – earlier in the series. Carlos and his wife's happiness is dependant not necessarily on a marriage but on a wedding, not on the institutional concept of government and religion recognised commitment, but on the symbolic performance of that commitment. Callie also recognises this as a request for certain symbols – agreeing to "put on a big white dress and dance down the aisle". It is important to recognise here that this episode of *Grey's* aired in 2009, years before marriage equality was legalised. Carlos' wish is not for his daughter to receive all the same benefits as a heterosexual couple through legalised same sex marriage, rather it is for her to perform a wedding for himself and his wife, for her to perform homonormativity and therefore become less threatening to his family's way of life.

This exchange sets out conditions for Carlos' relationship with his daughter. Callie must perform a wedding in order to convince her father that her relationship and her identity as

a bisexual woman are legitimate and can be successful. She must ally his fears of her queer life as an unhappy one by committing to the possibility of a wedding and children, which, as markers of heterosexual time (Goltz, 2010), symbolise happiness and success. Her queer happiness alone is not enough.

If marriage is an indicator of happiness, and marriage is homonormative, then it follows that homonormativity is an indicator of happiness, and so, happiness itself is homonormative. In order to be happy, gay people must reject any notion of difference, any idea of changing societal norms, and instead embrace the concept of sameness in order to gain access to those norms. To refer back to Ahmed:

Happiness seems to involve here a narrative of assimilation in the specific sense of becoming like. I considered earlier how if recognition for queers is made conditional on happiness, then they might have to minimize signs of queerness. One could also ask whether queer happiness involves an increasing proximity to social forms that are already attributed as happiness-causes (the family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness), which of course suggests that promoting queer happiness might involve promoting social forms in which other queers will not be able to participate. (2010, 112)

For Ahmed not only must gay people aspire to heterosexual happiness causes, they must also attain happiness – or at least give the impression of having attained happiness - in order to be recognised at all. In her chapter on *The Unhappy Queer*, Ahmed discusses “the psychic drama of the queer child”, positing that the parents of a queer child are less unhappy because the child is queer, but more “unhappy about the child being unhappy” (2010, 92). This positions queerness as a bringer of unhappiness, by its very construction as a life that rejects heteronormativity and therefore happiness. Ahmed describes happiness as almost communal, one’s unhappiness – or one’s life which is judged to be unhappy – causes unhappiness in others, and vice versa. In order to sustain happiness, everyone must be happy. Happiness is again tied to a certain idea of a heterosexual future:

The parent makes an act of identification with an imagined future of necessary and inevitable unhappiness. Such an identification through grief about what the child will lose reminds us that the queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life, as a life without the “things” that make you happy, or as a life that is depressed as it lacks certain things: a husband, children. (2010, 93)

In order to redress their parents' happiness, the queer child must prove that their life too can be happy, and can emulate the kind of happiness that is recognised by its adjacency to heterosexuality. The queer child must perform homonormativity in order to eliminate the parents' unhappiness about their perceived unhappiness. As we have seen in Goltz's work, no alternative happiness will be accepted in the "heteronormative court", only a future which follows heterosexual time – a homonormative future - will do. This then reinforces shame in the queer child, as they come to see their queerness as a source of their parents' unhappiness, if not also their own.

Callie's promised wedding materialises in the season seven episode *White Wedding*. Here *Grey's* focuses on Callie's relationship with her mother – Lucia – as Carlos' issues with his daughter's sexuality are considered resolved. Callie must again play the role of the queer child pleading to her parent's heteronormative court when Lucia makes it clear that she is unsupportive of the wedding:

Callie: I've been bending over backwards since you first got here just to make you feel comfortable.

Lucia: I didn't ask you to do anything for me.

Callie: I'm getting married in a church for you

Lucia: Don't you dare imply that there's anything about a wedding to a woman or a baby out of wedlock that's for me.

(*Grey's Anatomy: White Wedding* 2011)

Callie has planned certain aspects of her wedding to appease her mother's Catholicism – she's getting married in a church, with a minister, the couple say grace before their meals, she has a veil made to look like her mother's – specifically to assuage her mother's discomfort at her marrying another woman. Callie makes her wedding more traditional in order to please her mother, making the wedding – a symbol of her relationship - and her life, seem as close to a heterosexual one as possible so that her mother will not only recognise the wedding (and Callie and Arizona's child) as happiness markers, but also accept her daughter's relationship as non-threatening.

Callie's efforts to please her mother are, however, in vain. Lucia cannot reconcile her Catholic beliefs with her daughter's sexuality and refuses to attend the wedding:

Lucia: Do you know how devastating it is to raise a child, to love a child, and know you won't see that child in heaven?

Callie: Oh, Mom

Lucia: You are not a bride. And I am not the mother of the bride. And this, this isn't your wedding. It isn't right. I'm sorry. I can't be here. I just can't.

(*Grey's Anatomy: White Wedding*, 2011)

Here Lucia becomes Ahmed's parent who is "unhappy about the child being unhappy". Here the perceived unhappiness is not so much about an unhappy life, but an unhappy afterlife. Callie is then positioned as the queer child, trying to reduce her parent's unhappiness by performing homonormative happiness, through the traditional trappings of a *white wedding*.

The episode concludes with the *White Wedding* of the episode's title. Callie and Arizona are married by their friend and mentor Miranda Bailey after their minister is called away. Though this traditional element is changed, the rest of their wedding has all the tropes of a traditional heterosexual wedding – both brides wear white wedding gowns, are walked down the aisle by men (Arizona by her father, Callie by Mark – the father of their child), and exchange vows and rings (see fig.2). The traditional elements of their wedding are highlighted by their stark contrast with another wedding which takes place in the same episode – that of Meredith and Derek. The culmination of another storyline in the episode where the couple decides to adopt a baby, Meredith and Derek's wedding is spontaneous and purely about their legal status as a couple. They are married at city hall, by a judge, in their work clothes (see fig.3). They have no rings, exchange rudimentary vows and have no family or friends in attendance. Their decision to formalise their relationship is solely to help their chances of adoption – they do not need marriage to legitimise their relationship. By splicing scenes of a non-traditional heterosexual wedding into the sequence of Callie and Arizona's same sex white wedding, *Grey's* is making a clear statement in support of Marriage Equality (which at the time of showing was still four years away). By showing Meredith and Derek's wedding as a mere formalisation, performed perfunctorily by a judge in a courtroom, alongside Callie and Arizona's carefully planned expression of love and commitment in front of friends and family, the programme provides a rebuttal of the conservative argument that same sex marriage would threaten the sanctity of marriage, showing a same sex couple as far more reverent of this and the traditions of a wedding

than a heterosexual couple, who are able to access the full legal protections of marriage on a whim.

In the closing scene of *White Wedding*, Callie's father returns to her wedding alone. He cuts into the *father/daughter dance* section of the reception and asks to dance with his daughter:

Carlos: I was driving to the airport with your mother and it hit me. I've been looking forward to dancing with you on your wedding day since I first held you in my arms. So I turned the car around and I came back. So, here I am. To have this dance. With my daughter.

(*Grey's Anatomy: White Wedding*, 2011)

Though positioned as a display of her father's acceptance and a symbol of him choosing his daughter's happiness over that of his wife, Carlos never makes reference to Callie's happiness at all in his speech, only his own. He returns because he wants to dance with his daughter at her wedding, because his daughter's wedding is a symbol of success for him as a father. Callie's wedding is yet again positioned as a source of her parent's happiness, through fulfilling their wishes for her. For Carlos, the fact that Callie is getting married holds more significance than who she is marrying. The wedding ceremony serves as a symbol that his daughter is happy and leading a meaningful, successful life. She has reached a milestone that he had envisioned for her since she was born, and this makes him happy. Callie's happiness is not her own, rather it is a way of making her parents happy, successfully or otherwise.

If a queer life is already coded as unhappy, with the vision of a future outside of heterosexuality as lacking that which brings happiness, then queer lives can only achieve recognised happiness when they approximate heterosexuality – or when they include heterosexual happiness indicators such as marriage and children. Queerness is then defined as unhappy against straightness' happiness, reinforcing a shameful narrative of homosexuality as not only a barrier to "the good life" but also as something to be actively worked against, in the pursuit of enough happiness objects to make a queer life look as heterosexual as possible. *Grey's Anatomy* shows its audience that its gay characters can achieve happiness, but it does so through a homonormative lens, providing Callie and Arizona with a child and a traditional wedding to give them as many recognisable happiness markers as possible. For *Grey's*, this approach to marriage and weddings is incongruous, as

the series often uses the paradigm of a wedding as a source of conflict or tragedy. The presentation of a big white wedding as a ubiquitously happy event is specific to Callie and Arizona's storyline and is markedly different from how *Grey's* has presented the concept of marriage and the trappings of a traditional wedding ceremony in previous storylines, specifically a major plotline featuring Christina Yang

In season three episode *Didn't We Almost Have It All?*, Christina's engagement to her partner and boss Preston Burke falls apart at their elaborate wedding ceremony, where Burke leaves her at the altar. Throughout Christina's arc as a character, her relationship with traditional femininity is explored through her negotiation with her unrelenting commitment to her job, and her relationships with men and the idea of family. Christina is presented as steadfastly ambitious and unwilling to compromise when it comes to her career. She does not want to have children and often chooses her job over her personal relationships. During the episode, Christina's friend Meredith takes on the job of making sure Christina makes it down the aisle. Christina's happiness – symbolised by her wedding – is evidence to Meredith that "people like them" can be "normal" and happy. Meredith wants her friend to get married to prove to her that marriage is a possibility for her as well, not necessarily because she thinks it will make Christina happy. Throughout the episode Christina rubs up against the traditional trappings of the big white wedding her fiancé insisted upon. She is disgruntled when her boss gives her the day off to prepare, preferring to be working than "doing wedding stuff", she is sceptical when she's gifted a family heirloom choker necklace which feels far too tight to wear, and she's horrified when Burke's mother plucks her eyebrows out in an attempt to beautify her ready for the ceremony. Christina has a panic attack in the church vestibule as she's due to walk down the aisle. She asks Meredith to tell her what she would tell Meredith if their roles were reversed:

Meredith: Stop whining. This is your wedding day. You will go down that aisle and you will get married. If I have to kick your ass every step of the way to get you there, you will walk down the aisle, you will get married. Do you hear me Christina? We need this. We need you to get your happy ending.

(*Grey's Anatomy: Didn't We Almost Have It All?* 2007)

Again, Meredith ties Christina's perceived happiness to her own, it is "we" who need the wedding to go ahead, not "you". Christina's actual needs are not taken into account. Both Christina and Meredith push for the wedding to go ahead to prove that they are happy,

that they are capable of happiness, but it is clear that the wedding is not making Christina happy.

Just as Christina prepares to walk down the aisle, Burke comes into the vestibule and tells her he's leaving. He knows she doesn't want to get married and he doesn't want to force her to become someone she isn't.

Christina: I am wearing the dress. I am ready. And maybe I didn't want to before but now I really do think I want this.

Burke: I really wish that you didn't think. I wish that you knew.

(Grey's Anatomy: Didn't We Almost Have It All? 2007)

Christina references her dress as evidence that she's ready to get married. She has bent to the will of her fiancé and embraced the trappings of an extravagant wedding. Her white dress is a symbol of her willingness to become a wife. Christina "thinks she wants this", she doesn't know. She is getting married not because she knows this is what she wants, because she wants to commit to Burke and believes that married life will make her happy, but because marriage seems like something she should want to do, because she thinks she should want it, because marriage is a happiness marker.

At the end of the episode Christina returns to Burke's apartment and stands alone in her wedding dress (see fig. 4). Meredith walks through the door:

Christina: He's gone.

Meredith: I don't think he's gone.

Christina: No, his trumpet was here. His entire Eugene Foote collection, vinyls and CDs, his grandmother's picture was by the bed, his lucky scrub cap was hanging by the door.

He's gone! I'm, I'm free!

(Grey's Anatomy: Didn't We Almost Have It All? 2007) (See Fig. 5)

Christina starts hyperventilating and Meredith helps her take off the choker necklace that represented her identity as a "Burke woman". Meredith gets some scissors and cuts Christina's white dress off her, holding her as she cries in sheer relief (See figs. 6,7,8).

Christina is freed by the cancellation of her wedding, she is so relieved that she cries. This scene shows her realisation that she in fact did not want what she was supposed to want. Christina realises that the marriage/happiness connection is a lie. This is not her happy ending. Meredith cuts away Christina's wedding dress, destroying the symbol of traditional femininity that is literally suffocating her. Through this episode, *Grey's Anatomy* echoes the soap opera trope of the wedding gone wrong, as discussed in Chapter One. Christina and Burke's elaborate wedding ceremony is a source of conflict, not happiness, and ultimately marks the exit of a series regular as Burke leaves the programme soon after⁵. Whereas such episodes in soap operas are often used to emphasise the sadness of a tragedy as it takes place on an occasion which is expected to be happy – "the happiest day of one's life" even – *Didn't We Almost Have It All?* Instead uses the failed wedding as an example of a wedding as an unhappy occasion in itself, rather than a happy day marred by an outside tragedy. Christina does not want to get married. For her, the traditional big wedding is a deeply uncomfortable experience and the idea of a married future is suffocating. Here *Grey's Anatomy* presents a wedding which audiences hope will go wrong, so that Christina is freed from the constraints of what she is expected to want, what she know should make her happy, but what is clearly the wrong decision.

Christina and Burke's impending marriage is allowed to be presented as something other than happy. Marriage for Christina is a bad choice, something she feels pressured into but doesn't actually want. Christina is allowed to reject marriage, to find it stifling and be overwhelmingly relieved when it doesn't happen. This narrative is not permitted in Callie and Arizona's wedding. For a same sex couple, marriage must be universally happy, scepticism or doubt is not allowed. Heterosexual Christina can refer to marriage as "becoming chattel", but lesbian Arizona must put her previously established doubts of marriage and motherhood aside and embrace homonormativity. Christina's wedding is a source of conflict and drama, further establishing her character as rejecting of traditional ideals of femininity and family, in favour of her career. Callie and Arizona's wedding has no room for non-traditional elements and no space for anything other than happiness. A smaller subplot in *White Wedding* features Arizona struggling with there not being a scheduled moment of silence in the ceremony to remember her dead brother. Even though this lack of recognition of unhappiness makes Arizona unhappy, nothing is changed, there is

⁵ It is perhaps interesting to note here that Burke was written out of *Grey's Anatomy* after actor Isaiah Washington used gay slurs against fellow cast member TR Knight. The wedding episode may have ended differently if his character had remained on the programme.

no moment of remembrance, Arizona must contain her sadness in a moment of emotion before the ceremony (See Fig.9), and then maintain a happy façade, in order to keep the wedding a happy event.

This presentation of Callie and Arizona's wedding as unfalteringly happy continues after *White Wedding* as the programme treats the episode as the happy ending to Callie's struggles with her family's homophobia. Though Callie ultimately has her father attend her wedding, her mother never reappears during the episode. The audience is given no information as to her whereabouts, left to assume that she is still sitting outside in the car after Carlos changed his mind en route to the airport. This conflict is never resolved, she is still against Callie's wedding and still dismisses her family as immoral. Callie does not ask Carlos about her mother, her father's attendance is seemingly enough for her. Though this lack of a neat and tidy ending reflects real life situations where queer people's parents may disagree on their approaches towards their child's sexuality, and acknowledges the real difficulties that queer people with religious families often face, the decision to paper over the pain that this causes by making no further mention of Lucia's disapproval seems to suggest that it is inconsequential. Callie's mother isn't featured, or even mentioned, at all in the rest of her time on the series – a further five seasons. There is no reconciliation as there is with her father, and there is no mention of any prolonged strife caused by her rejection. The issue simply disappears. Callie's family's difficulty in accepting her sexuality including both her parents' aggressive rejections of her, her relationship and her baby daughter, their insistence that she was going to hell, a long lasting separation from her entire family – orchestrated by her father, her father's attempt to "pray away the gay", and her mother's refusal to witness her wedding, are all solved by a dance with her dad at her wedding reception.

Through their foregrounding of the issue of Marriage Equality, neoliberal approaches to LGBTQ rights strategies positioned homonormativity as the ultimate path to happiness for gay and lesbian individuals. This connection between homonormativity and happiness promoted assimilation and largely ignored intersectionalities within the LGBTQ community, allowing for the privileging of white, cisgender, affluent gay and lesbian individuals over those who could not, or would not, conform to homonormative paradigms. The idealisation of marriage as a technique of "pleading to the heteronormative court", presented marriage as the only way for gay and lesbian people to attain happiness, therefore implying that a queer life without marriage is an unhappy life. As network television exists in a neoliberal space, ideations of homonormativity can be seen within the content of its programming as

it attempts to please both sides of the political spectrum. *Grey's Anatomy* provides its same sex couple with a traditional white wedding during the run up to the Supreme Court's decision on Marriage Equality, presenting them as Goltz's "good gays" who respect the institution of marriage and want to be allowed to participate in it. Callie and Arizona's wedding is presented as a happy ending to Callie's issues with her homophobic parents, despite her mother's continuing rejection of her and her family. Unhappiness is not permitted in Callie and Arizona's wedding, positioning it in contrast to previous representations of marriage in the *Grey's* universe which allowed its heterosexual characters to critique marriage and reject it altogether. Though *White Wedding* presents a happy ending for Callie's relationship with her father, it is important to mention that it does not act as a happy ending for Callie and Arizona's relationship. The characters experience unhappiness and conflict throughout the rest of their tenure on the programme, including the breakdown of their relationship. However, these unhappinesses are notably detached from the characters' queerness, existing as dramatic plot points which could reasonably happen to any of the *Grey's* characters regardless of their sexuality. Callie and Arizona's wedding may not have protected them from general future unhappiness, but it does provide a happy ending for their past queer unhappiness, allowing them to experience unhappiness of the same types and at the same level of their heterosexual counterparts.

Chapter Three: Gay Unhappiness, Queer Unhappiness

For gay characters on network television, happiness and homonormativity are linked through the institution of marriage. In this chapter I discuss portrayals of gay unhappiness and discuss whether as homonormativity is tied to happiness, queerness is then defaulted to a position of unhappiness. I offer a working definition of gayness and queerness and examine what gay unhappiness looks like on network television in a post Marriage Equality America – focusing specifically on the ABC programme *How to Get Away with Murder*. I question whether, in contemporary representations of gayness on network television, queerness has taken the place of gayness as a tragic consequence of failing to uphold hetero/homonormativity. I continue to draw from Duggan's concept of homonormativity, and look to Stephen Tropiano's history of gay characters on television for context on the relationship between gay representations on television and shifts in public opinion. I further refer to Goltz's work on gay futurity and Edelman's writings on the spectre of AIDS discourse in the writing of gay stories.

Whilst historical representations of gay and lesbian characters relied on stories of tragedy and isolation, modern gay characters are less defined by their sexuality and given the opportunity to achieve happiness in the same way as their heterosexual counterparts – through marriage. This link between marriage as a homonormative concept and happiness, ties happiness and homonormativity together and implies that happiness can only be achieved by gay characters if they reinforce heterosexual norms and follow a heterosexual timeline. The question then becomes, if happiness is tied to homonormativity, is gayness still tied to unhappiness, to tragedy? Does this binary still relegate gayness to a position of lacking, of yearning for a happiness embodied by the heterosexual ideal? Do happy gay characters who reach a point of happiness through a homonormative lens, reinforce the idea that gayness and happiness are incompatible?

Clearly happy gay characters exist on network television. Callie and Arizona are shown as experiencing happiness for a time on *Grey's Anatomy*. As shown in Chapter Two, their wedding is an unwaveringly happy occasion, their relationship is shown as stable and loving for a season after their wedding episode and they are both ultimately given an off camera happy ending, implying the reunion of their family unit, after Arizona's departure in season fourteen. The characters however, do exist in a network drama, and therefore experience unhappiness throughout their tenure on the programme. After their wedding, Callie and Arizona's unhappiness is caused by external circumstances that affect other, straight

characters on the programme as well – a plane crash that causes Arizona to lose a leg, the depression and PTSD that she suffers as a result of this, infidelity, divorce, and a custody battle – none of which explicitly intersect with the characters’ bisexuality or lesbianism. Even the custody battle, where Callie – who is the biological mother of their child Sofia – wants to take Sofia to live in New York with her new partner, doesn’t touch on the specificities of a same sex custody trial, instead playing out with very little mention of any issues which could have arisen from their situation as a same sex couple. Contrast this with a similar storyline in *ER* (a spiritual predecessor to *Grey’s*) during the early 2000s, where Doctor Kerry Weaver (one of NBC’s – and primetime network television’s – first recurring gay characters) fights her late partner Sandy’s parents for custody of their child. Here, Kerry’s homosexuality proves to be a stumbling block in her case, as Sandy’s parents disapprove of their daughter’s homosexuality and judge Kerry to be unfit to take care of their grandson. Kerry’s lack of a biological connection to her son is also used against her in the case, and provides the basis of the grandparents’ claim for custody. The legal issues which Kerry Weaver faces in *ER* are not mentioned in Callie and Arizona’s storyline in *Grey’s Anatomy*, over fifteen years later, implying that those issues are no longer present for gay couples post- Marriage Equality. Callie and Arizona experience the same amount of sadness that any heterosexual couple would during a legal battle for custody of their child – their gayness plays no part. Institutional homophobia does not come into play and, ultimately, the issue of a biological connection to the child – which proved difficult to overcome for Kerry Weaver – proves inconsequential, as Arizona is granted full custody by the court.

This lack of institutional homophobia presented in Callie and Arizona’s storylines across their seasons of *Grey’s* echoes early criticism showrunner Shonda Rimes drew for her treatment of race and her practice of “colour-blind casting”. Critics claimed that by disregarding race in the casting process, and making little mention of race within the shows’ narratives, Rimes created a “post-racial” utopia in her programming which failed to engage with the reality of institutional racism in the US. Jade Petermon connects this trend in the early seasons of Rimes’ programmes with neoliberalism, focusing on the characters of Richard Webber and Miranda Bailey in *Grey’s* whose career successes and positions of power within the hospital are seen as unremarkable and untouched by the institutional racism which they would likely have experienced in reality. Petermon writes:

The bootstraps narrative, on which neoliberalism’s cult of individual responsibility hinges, requires that tokens exist as examples of what is possible if only an individual works hard enough. (2018, 103)

By choosing to leave Webber and Bailey's race un-remarked upon, their success can be read as an endorsement of neoliberal ideals and of the idea that the US is living in a post-racial era. Petermon contextualises this as neoliberalism "appropriat[ing] the look and language of progress to renew oppressive mechanisms and stifle bona fide societal transformation." (2018, 104). Superficially, Rimes' programming presents racially diverse casts which all prominently feature women of colour in positions of power who are successful in their white collar, intellectual careers. However, by failing to include specific commentary on race or present racism as a barrier which these women have had to overcome, these representations of black success serve to erase racism entirely, feeding into a neoliberal narrative that racism no longer has an impact on the lives of black Americans.

This criticism of the way race is presented in early seasons of Shonda Rimes' programming⁶ echoes the treatment of gayness in *Grey's*. Callie and Arizona are both successful LGBTQ women for whom homophobia has had little to no impact on their careers. Callie's family's refusal to accept her bisexuality is the only instance of homophobia experienced by either character, and this is presented as an anomaly. It is also important to note the racial context here as Callie is Latina and her family's disapproval of her relationship is shown to be rooted in their Catholicism and Latinx culture. Petermon's analysis of how race intersects with neoliberal ideals in *Shondaland*⁷ can also be applied in a wider context to identity politics as a whole, including representations of sexuality and gender.

Callie and Arizona's gayness is never portrayed as a source of unhappiness after their wedding – where Callie's struggle to be accepted by her father is resolved. They experience the same level of drama as their heterosexual counterparts, their gayness having little to no impact on their happinesses or unhappinesses. They experience no direct homophobia after their wedding, encounter no institutional barriers or professional bias, and rarely, if ever, come into contact with gay issues outside of their middle class experiences. Similarly, their moments of joy or positive experiences are also rarely directly related to their gayness. Neither Callie nor Arizona are shown to have gay friends or a queer community with whom they spend time, there are no on-screen celebrations of LGBTQ political

⁶ Petermon focuses specifically on early seasons of *Grey's* and *Scandal*, noting that Rimes' approach to race later shifted, perhaps as a result of her success and the power she gained as a result. Rimes' later show, *How to Get Away with Murder* is not discussed specifically in this context.

⁷ *Shondaland* refers to Shonda Rimes' production company which created and ran *Grey's Anatomy* and its spin-offs *Private Practice* and *Station 19*, as well as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*.

achievements. Callie and Arizona are portrayed as gay and happy – the two states coexisting, but rarely intersecting. As gay characters such as Callie and Arizona are so infrequently required to engage with the political aspects of their sexuality, this raises the question of whether it is not gayness that is incompatible with happiness, but instead queerness. Gay characters can live happy lives – or at least lives that match up with widely accepted happiness indicators – but this happiness is often gained by sacrificing their queerness. The happy gay characters we see on network television often live lives that follow a homonormative timeline. So, when happiness is tied to straightness – or approximations of straightness – it is then queerness which is positioned as the binary opposite, with gayness permitted access to straight happiness as long as it renounces queerness and embraces heterosexual norms.

To investigate this, first one must examine the difference between gayness and queerness. In her introduction to *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Michele Aaron defines queer as:

represent[ing] the resistance to, primarily, the normative codes of gender and sexual expression – that masculine men sleep with feminine women - but also to the restrictive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality – that only men sleep with men, and women sleep with women. In this way, queer, as a critical concept, encompasses the non-fixity of gender expression and non-fixity of both straight and gay sexuality (2004, 5)

She goes on to say:

To be queer now... means to be untethered from “conventional” codes of behaviour. At its most expansive and utopian, queer contests (hetero- and homo-) normality (2004, 5)

Queerness then focuses on fluidity, rejecting the idea that identities are fixed and that binaries can be easily constructed and maintained, both between the constructs of “gay” and “straight” but also within its own community, allowing for concepts such as “gay” and “lesbian” to be questioned. Queer contests. Queer is active, and reactive – denying restriction and questioning norms. Gayness was constructed in opposition to straightness, providing a binary opposite to reinforce the concept of heterosexuality. Without gayness, straightness would not need to define itself, as Becker explains:

As socially constricted concepts, homosexuality and heterosexuality are mutually dependent terms. One doesn't mean anything without the other. These two paradigmatic options also comprise a status hierarchy in which the dominance of heterosexuality is established at homosexuality's expense. Being straight has been moral, legal, and normal, because being gay has been constructed as immoral, illegal, and abnormal (2006, 7)

Gayness was constructed by straightness, in order to form a negative to its positive. Queerness however constructed itself as an attempt to break out of that binary, to blur the lines between this or that, and to question the idea of categories altogether. Queerness creates a collective identification, including not only gay and lesbian identities but also bisexuality, transsexuality and gender non-conformity. One doesn't have to be gay to be queer, and one can easily be gay and reject queerness altogether. (Dyer, 2002) If gayness speaks to sexual identity, queerness speaks to a sexual politics, to an activism grounded in sexual identity but not fixed within it.

Queerness requires political engagement, insofar as it requires an awareness of the part that binary designations play in the distribution of power and a commitment to challenging that system, whether that be purely through one's own existence, or through active participation in protest and political process. Queerness can also be defined as anti-assimilation:

In opposition to such reformist "we're just like you" goals, queer theorists have focused their attention on identity's contingency, fluidity and constructedness and suggested that it is in the destabilisation of identity categories that effective political practice is to be found. (Currah, 2001, 180)

Assimilationist tactics prioritise access to heterosexual paradigms, convincing those in power that gay people are "just like you", erasing difference and promoting the idea that gay people want the same things as straight people – they aren't a threat, they want access to straight institutions, not to break them down. Queerness instead focuses on difference – forms a communal identity from being "not", and rejects the hegemony of patriarchal institutions. Queerness opposes institutions and aims to disrupt the binaries that maintain them. Queerness cannot assimilate as assimilation requires a tacit support of the structures it desires access to. Queerness aims to break down those structures and sees disassembling as more effective than falling into line. In these ways queerness can be seen as an

alternative to Duggan's homonormativity, refusing to "go home and cook dinner forever" (2002, 189).

If one can distinguish between gayness and queerness, then it is clear to see that whereas gayness was previously tied to unhappiness in historical representations of gay characters on television, it is now queerness that takes its place as the tragic counterpart – not to straightness, but to homonormativity. Callie and Arizona can be read as gay but not queer⁸ and perhaps this is why they are permitted happiness on screen. Another ABC programme, created by the same production company as *Grey's* (Shonda Rimes' Shondaland), soapy legal thriller *How to Get Away with Murder* (hereinafter referred to as *Murder*) features same sex characters whose identities fall closer to the concept of queerness than those in *Grey's*, however the programme consistently constructs their queerness as tied to their unhappiness.

Murder focuses on a group of law students who repeatedly find themselves involved in murders and their subsequent cover ups. The programme follows the personal relationships of the group and their professor, as they struggle to keep their secrets and deal with their guilty consciences. One central character is Connor Walsh, a gay man who enjoys a life of casual sex and no strings attached hook-ups, and often employs his sexuality to get ahead in his career. During the first season of *Murder* Connor finds himself developing feelings for Oliver Hampton, an IT specialist – and tries to give up his lifestyle of casual sex in order to settle into a monogamous relationship. Connor and Oliver's on/off relationship becomes one of the more prominent personal storylines in the programme and spans all of the shows' five seasons to date.

Murder is a programme about suffering – each of the six central protagonists deals with extreme trauma, guilt, and the fear of being found out and sent to prison – but pain and unhappiness seem to be more integral to Connor and Oliver's storyline than to the other relationships on the programme. Throughout the series unhappiness breaks Connor and Oliver apart, and brings them back together. During the first season, Connor sees Oliver as a chance at happiness, at first considering himself to be unable to form a lasting relationship, but later realising he wants stable monogamy more than his former life of sexual freedom. Connor's participation in casual sex and hook-up culture is tied to sadness,

⁸ Neither Callie – who is newly bisexual – nor Arizona – who is established as a long time lesbian – interact with any other gay or lesbian characters that they are not in relationships with. They have no community of LGBTQ friends, they rarely encounter homophobia, personal or institutional, and do not engage with politics in any way.

with Oliver representing monogamous domesticity and providing a happy escape from Connor's self-loathing and guilt. As the two men develop their relationship, Oliver becomes more involved with Connor and his friend's wrongdoings and begins to suffer as well.

Murder uses blocking and framing to delineate between Oliver as happy, domestic, monogamy and Connor as unhappy, lonely, promiscuity. Thresholds become a consistent theme in their scenes together, whether this is Connor pushing his way through Oliver's door after they reconcile (See fig. 10), being thrown out of Oliver's doorway after an argument, or standing on the brink of their bedroom as Oliver reveals his HIV diagnosis (See fig. 11), Connor is regularly standing on the outside of domesticity, asking permission to be let in, or being rejected from Oliver's domestic space. We never see Connor's own apartment, scenes with Connor and Oliver always take place at Oliver's home. Connor always shows up at Oliver's door, never the other way around, which positions Oliver as a gatekeeper of sorts, with the power to decide whether Connor is allowed to access his domestic space, and the homonormativity that comes along with it. When Oliver breaks up with Connor after Connor sleeps with someone else, Oliver physically pushes Connor out of his apartment, through his front door and out into the hallway (See fig. 12). Connor has broken the rules of monogamy (and homonormativity) and is therefore ejected from domesticity. He later attempts a reconciliation by bringing flowers to Oliver's door, but is turned away by a man Oliver is likely sleeping with who has temporarily taken his place in domestic bliss (See fig.13). Connor and Oliver get back together after Connor again shows up at Oliver's door, this time reeling from the trauma of the group's first murder, and in the middle of a hyperventilating panic attack (See fig 14.). It is only when Connor is truly suffering, both physically and mentally, that he is allowed back through Oliver's door, and back into homonormativity.

Here, Oliver takes the position of Goltz's "good gay", with Connor often finding himself on trial in his "heteronormative court". When Connor is unable to meet homonormative standards, to comply with Goltz's heteronormative time (commitment, monogamy etc.) he is punished, cast out, ejected from his haven of domestic bliss and thrown back into queerness, casual sex and self-loathing. He has sinned and must be banished from his "normal" domestic paradise. Oliver on the other hand exemplifies the "good gay" construct – he lacks narcissism, is dismissive of gay hook-up culture and wants to settle down and have children, and therefore represents happiness in contrast to Connor's "bad queer" misery. Goltz suggests that the concept of the "good" or "normal" gay is used to further the

gay rights cause, by dismissing those aspects of gay culture which challenge heteronormative ideals as the follies of a minority of bad actors:

The rhetorical strategy works to challenge the narratives that demonize gay men as sexually undisciplined, incapable of commitment, and anti-family, by constructing a “normal gay” who wants the same thing as “everyone else”. (2010, 87)

Oliver falls definitively into the “normal gay” category, and his normalcy is used time and again throughout *Murder* to provide contrast to Connor’s queerness, create tensions in their relationship, and ultimately provide Connor with a path to homonormative happiness. Strangely, Connor is not at first presented as unhappy with his lifestyle of casual sex. He is confident, and revels in his ability to sleep with whichever man he chooses. It is only when he meets Oliver that he starts to think of his former life as unhappy and starts to feel ashamed of his sexual history. In this sense, Oliver not only provides Connor with a path to happiness, but also shows him that happiness is possible at all. By constructing Oliver’s life as a “normal gay” as a happy one, *Murder* positions Connor’s life as the binary opposite, as unhappy despite the lack of evidence to support this. Through Oliver, Connor sees his former life as merely shadows on his cave wall. Once Oliver brings him out into the light, he can no longer go back to enjoying the show.

At the end of season one, Oliver is diagnosed as HIV positive after he and Connor break up and Oliver tries out casual sex. Oliver’s diagnosis is set up as a twist for the audience, who are primed to think that Connor would be the one more likely to have contracted an STI from his former involvement in hook-up culture. Oliver is portrayed as nervous, nerdy, and sexually unconfident. He is interested in long term relationships rather than one night stands and often seems intimidated by the idea of casual sex. The revelation that Oliver is positive, is therefore intended to be a shock to the audience and can easily be read as a punishment for Oliver having strayed into queer hook-up culture, and away from homonormativity. Oliver betrays his position as the “good gay” and is punished. Despite modern understandings of the disease and work to dispel the myths surrounding the AIDS epidemic, culturally, the mention of HIV still brings forth echoes of the anti-gay rhetoric used by conservative governments during the 80s. When seen in the context of a gay man contracting HIV through casual sex, it is difficult to separate the spurious cultural associations of HIV as a “gay plague” caused by sexual liberation and cast as some kind of karmic punishment for daring to break with heterosexual norms, from what we now know about the condition. This association between HIV and gayness was reinforced by the use

of HIV as a storyline on network medical dramas during the 80s, where the condition was often used as a teachable moment to educate viewers about homosexuality and homophobia by featuring patients diagnosed with the disease (Tropiano, 2002, 33).

Edelman discusses the construction of AIDS narratives in his work *Homographesis*:

In the mirror of “AIDS” the erotic abandon, the luxurious collapse into the “black hole” of desire, must give way, depending on the stripe of the narrative, to death, as a recognition of the wages of sin; to monogamy, as a recognition of the immaturity of “promiscuity”; or to activism, as a recognition of the political folly of defining gay identity through sexuality alone. (1994, 115)

For Edelman, narratives surrounding AIDS construct the disease as a punishment for the perceived excesses of homosexuality – and specifically, anal sex. AIDS becomes an impetus, causing either death or the renouncing of queer excess. Because of its connection to the gay community, AIDS is mythologised into a consequence of living outside of heterosexuality and the traditional family unit. In *Murder*, Oliver is made to suffer because he is tempted into queer promiscuity and non-monogamy. He gives into his desire, and embraces what is expected of him as a gay man who has recently been spurned - he later explains that his friends convinced him to “get laid, rebound the pain away” (*How to Get Away with Murder: She’s Dying*, 2015). His HIV status later confines him to monogamy, as he struggles to find men other than Connor who will sleep with him. Oliver’s connection with Connor allows Connor to see a path to happiness but provides Oliver with a path to suffering. Where Connor is permitted a chance at salvation through Oliver’s “good gay” persona, Oliver is tainted by Connor’s “bad gay” designation, by his queerness.

It is important to note that Oliver’s HIV status is not presented as a death sentence. In fact, *Murder* goes out of its way to show its audiences the strides that have been made in HIV research and treatments. Oliver is –at time of writing – still alive in the series. He occasionally makes mention of his low “viral load” and at one point explains to a potential sexual partner that it would be safer to sleep with him than with a person who hasn’t been tested. Connor and Oliver both take PrEP when their relationship resumes, and there is frank and open discussion about what this means for their sexual relationship. In many ways *Murder* portrays a modern take on HIV, taking care to destigmatise the disease and present a realistic, up to date characterisation of living with the disease, rather than dying from it. However, for all its ground-breaking frank discussions of gay HIV + life, *Murder* still frames Oliver’s HIV as a consequence of his breaching of homonormativity and straying

into queerness. *Murder* may not show HIV as capital punishment, but it is punishment nonetheless. Through this, not only is casual sex contextualised as queer, but so is its consequence – HIV. Oliver’s construction as a “good gay” allows for a queer storyline to be told through a homonormative character, allowing the network to tell a queer story in a way that fits its neoliberal sensibilities. *Murder* recognises HIV as an enduring part of many gay men’s lives, gesturing to gay unhappiness in a context which allows for a distancing between the real life problems facing many positive gay men and the fictional reality of Oliver’s life living with the disease. For example, Oliver has a well-paid job, good healthcare coverage and a supportive group of friends and family. Oliver can afford the medication he needs to live with HIV, and have it make little impact on his day to day life. This is not the case for many gay men in reality who are lower class, underpaid or unemployed, homeless, or whose work doesn’t provide healthcare benefits. By telling a modern HIV storyline through Oliver, and not Connor, *Murder* is able to “normalise” HIV, to make it trivial, in much the same way that homonormative representations of gayness normalise queer identities.

Throughout the next three seasons of *Murder*, Connor and Oliver’s relationship develops and the couple talk frequently about marriage. After rejecting a proposal from Oliver in season three, Connor proposes marriage again in season four:

Connor: I owe you an apology. When my dad was in town he told me that he didn’t think you were the right guy for me.

Oliver: What? I was so nice!

Connor: He’s a moron Oli, and wrong. Because I am so happy right now. To the point that I’m calling my sister just to tell her how happy I am. And that’s never happened before. And that’s because of you. So uh, this is a twisty tie, that I took off our loaf of bread, which speaks to one of the reasons I love you, because you’re a gay man who eats bread and encourages me to eat bread too. You let me be me but you make me a better version of me and I never thought that I could be this guy and I don’t want to wait anymore. I want you. Marry me Oliver Hampton. Marry me so I can spend the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you make me.

(*How to Get Away with Murder: Nobody Roots for Goliath*, 2018)

Connor proposes because he is happy. He knows he is happy because he performs happiness for his family members. He uses a “twisty tie” from a loaf of bread as an engagement ring, using a symbol of their “normal” and “boring” domesticity as a symbol of their commitment. The bread is also cited as a reason for Connor’s love of Oliver – that he eats bread, or that he is “not like other gays”. Diet culture and obsessions over body image have become tied to gay male culture, especially in the age of social media and the Insta-gay. This connection between gay culture and narcissism is discussed by Edelman in *Homographesis*, where he suggests that discourses surrounding AIDS activism focused on demonising gay narcissism as gay passivity, and as counter-productive to activism. Narcissism was seen as a negative characteristic of gay culture, and one which prevented the community from taking decisive action to stop the spread of AIDS and demand political action on the issue. This criticism often came from within the gay community itself, with some politically active groups condemning those who continued to engage with club culture and casual sex. (1994, 110)

By holding Oliver up as an example of a man who refuses to engage with gay culture, and positioning him as a source of happiness because of his disavowal of such culture, Connor “emulates heterosexual contempt” (Edelman, 1994, 110) for the gay culture he sees as narcissistic. Connor wants to marry Oliver because Oliver is a “good gay”, because he doesn’t indulge in narcissism (or hook up culture), because he represents “normality”. By specifying that he loves Oliver for not buying into that culture, and for encouraging him to eschew it as well, Connor is in effect praising Oliver for rejecting queer culture (which we already know he rarely partakes in) and therefore recognising his own source of happiness as not only set apart from queerness, but that which pulls him away from his own queerness, into a more homonormative lifestyle.

By constructing homonormativity as a path towards the happiness that marriage brings, network television such as *Murder* designates queerness as unhappy by default. If we assume that certain objects or states are happiness causes, then those who don’t possess those objects or reject those states are seen as lacking. Goltz describes this binary in terms of identification with a future:

Heteronormative temporal perfection tells a story of happily ever after: love conquering all, the blessed gift of children, and a guaranteed slice of the American dream. Monogamous love, marriage, and procreation provide the keys to the kingdom, the honour of respectful sexual citizenship, and identification with a future

worth embracing. On the other side, there is punishment and misery for those who fail to embrace and perform the assumed rightness of heterosexuality or fail to identify with heteronormative structures for future building. (2010, 84)

By reinforcing the concept of heteronormative time as the ideal, the bringer of happiness, *Murder* again presents marriage, happiness, and homonormativity as connected. Connor starts his storyline in queer unhappiness and works towards marriage as his happy ending. Queerness is positioned as before, homonormativity through marriage as the happily ever after. Weddings are also again connected with happiness here, with Connor and Oliver's initial decision to get married without a wedding ceremony causing uproar from their friends who want a wedding to bring them joy. Eventually the couple change their minds after a visit to the Supreme Court reminds them of the gravity of the "people who fought tooth and nail for [them] to be gay and equal" (*How to Get Away with Murder: The Day Before He Died*, 2018), cementing Marriage Equality as a bringer of happiness, and a wedding as a symbol of that happiness.

Through these connections between marriage, domesticity, homonormativity and happiness *Murder* suggests that choosing a life outside of this condemns one to a life of unhappiness and suffering. The suffering Connor and Oliver experience is caused by their rejections of homonormative happiness. Connor's unhappiness outside of their relationship is soothed by his connection with Oliver and the concept of safe domesticity he provides. When the couple are separated, it is unhappiness which brings them back together, whether that be Connor's attempts to escape his shame and self-loathing through identification with Oliver's "good" gay persona, or the couple's mutual unhappiness which marriage promises to resolve. A clear line is drawn, and exemplified by the thresholds Connor must navigate to gain access to domestic bliss – one is either a "good gay" living a monogamous, sexually conservative lifestyle, or one must suffer in one's rejection of that normality, in one's queerness.

Through connecting same sex marriage, homonormativity and happiness, network television has moved on from representing gay lives as unhappy in contrast to straight lives, instead presenting queerness as unhappy in relation to homonormativity. Gay characters are either presented as non-queer and happy – as in *Grey's Anatomy*, or queer and unhappy, striving to be given access to happy homonormativity as in *Murder*. This construction presents an idea of gayness which shuns queer identification and embraces homonormative institutions as the ideal, and the only way for gay people to achieve

happiness. Queer unhappiness is shown as the before, to happy homonormativity's after, yet again using marriage as a straightening device, luring queers away from their unhappy lives of non-monogamy and blurred sexual lines, into monogamous, domestic, gay bliss. Queerness, and therefore anti-assimilation sexual politics, is shown as something from which to escape, rather than something to embrace and use for further gay liberation, again prizing a neoliberal stance on cultural and sexual politics which aims to silence the LGBTQ community by convincing them that they already have their happy ending, as long as they choose to conform to it.

Chapter Four: The Politics of Queer Unhappiness in the Trump Era

In Chapter Three I discussed how the link between homonormativity, same-sex marriage and happiness, and the ways in which this link is reinforced by network television portrayals of gay and lesbian characters, positions queerness by default as a source of unhappiness. In this chapter I further examine the concept of queer unhappiness from a political perspective, questioning how unhappiness relates to political action and how queer unhappiness fits into the LGBTQ rights movement. I review the changing political climate in regards to LGBTQ issues as the US is nearing the end of the Trump administration's first term, and question whether parallels can be drawn from this new level of political uncertainty to the prevalence of political commentary in network television. Drawing from Ahmed's work on *The Unhappy Queer*, I focus specifically on the revival of *Will & Grace* and how its engagement with queer political issues allows for queer unhappiness to be seen on screen in a way that creates tension with its more conservative sitcom form. I focus on the political beginnings of the programme's revival, and the contrast that this more politically vocal season has with the infamously apolitical original series run. I engage with three episodes in particular; *11 Years Later* – where Grace is offered a job decorating Trump's Oval Office, *Grandpa Jack* – where Jack's newly discovered grandson is sent to conversion therapy, and *The Beefcake and the Cake Beef* – where Grace fights for Karen's right to have a bakery bake a cake for Trump's birthday. Finally, I discuss whether the current political climate has put an end to the narrative of marriage equality as a happy ending for the LGBTQ rights movement, and whether network television's neoliberal values will prevent mass market television from ever embracing queer perspectives and making decisive political statements.

Just over a year after the Supreme Court voted to legalise same sex marriage across all fifty states, the US elected Donald Trump as their next president, ushering in a new wave of far right conservatism. After the 2016 election, LGBTQ rights organisation GLAAD started a running count of attacks on LGBTQ rights made by Trump and his administration. As of June 2019, the count numbered 114 attacks, including verbal comments, tweets, memos, funding cuts and policy changes which directly or indirectly threaten the rights or freedoms of LGBTQ identified Americans. Though the full list is too numerous to include in its totality, here is a summary of said "attacks", carried out from Trump's swearing in as President in January 2017, to the time of writing in June 2019:

- Minutes after Trump is sworn in, any mention of the LGBTQ community is erased from government websites.
- During a World AIDS Day proclamation, Trump fails to mention people of colour or the LGBTQ community. Soon after, he fires the entire staff of the White House Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. A later review of government funding reveals that the Trump administration used AIDS relief funding to donate a grant to an anti LGBTQ group working in Africa. In March 2019, Trump's 2020 Fiscal Year Budget cuts over \$1.7 billion in spending from three key components in the global fight against HIV and AIDS.
- Protections for trans people who are incarcerated were rolled back, allowing prisons to house inmates based on their "biological sex" rather than their gender identity. Following this, the Department of Justice claimed that sex discrimination in the workplace does not extend to trans people, the Department of Education rescinded Obama era guidance on bathroom usage in schools which protected trans students from discrimination, and Trump announced that he would impose a ban on all trans people from serving in the military in any capacity. In the past year, Trump has announced plans to rescind Obama era policy for homeless shelters which would allow shelters to deny access to trans Americans based on their gender identity, and suggested that trans Americans would no longer be guaranteed healthcare protections under the Affordable Healthcare Act.
- In the past year, Trump announced plans to implement new policies which would allow adoption agencies to deny LGBTQ couples the ability to adopt, and allow doctors to deny medical care to LGBTQ Americans based on "religious exemptions", and denied US Embassy buildings permission to fly the Pride flag from their buildings during Pride month.
- In a New York Times profile on Vice President Mike Pence, Trump jokes on Pence when asked about LGBTQ rights "Don't ask that guy – he wants to hang them all!". (GLAAD, 2019)

These restrictions to the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ Americans, and the rhetoric surrounding them, threaten to undermine the progress that the LGBTQ rights movement gained with the passing of Marriage Equality. Denying access to healthcare and allowing adoption agencies to refuse same sex couples removes two key benefits of marriage which fuelled the campaign for Marriage Equality – healthcare benefits and easier access to

adoption. Trump's election, and the myriad of anti- LGBTQ policies and rhetoric that followed, constituted a backlash to the progress of the Obama era and clearly disrupts the narrative which positioned Marriage Equality as the happy ending for the LGBTQ rights movement – in fact rights which were so hard won can easily be taken away by an unsympathetic government. The Trump administration's anti-LGBTQ stance also challenges notions of homonormativity as an effective tool in the LGBTQ rights movement. Alongside the threat of rescinding same sex marriage rights, or restrictions to the rights that made marriage desirable in the first place, sit actions taken to expel trans people from the military – suggesting that no matter how hard assimilationists have fought to gain access to typically heterosexual institutions, there is always the risk of rejection further down the line. If we are to tie Marriage Equality and homonormativity with gay happiness, as demonstrated in earlier chapters, then this happiness – or these symbols of happiness – are destabilised. It is no longer easy for network television to show a happy gay couple seamlessly entering into homonormative married life – especially if that couple features on a programme set in a modern day reality. It is no longer easy for such programmes to avoid engaging with issues of homophobia or transphobia, as said issues – though longstanding for those who are members of the community themselves– are now regular news items, forming part of the national (and international) conversation about Trump and his impact. Queer unhappiness is now difficult to ignore – as I will discuss later in this chapter - which poses a problem for neoliberal network television, which relies upon a precarious balance of staying relevant and maintaining mass appeal for its revenue.

Recognising unhappiness disrupts happiness, so happiness requires a certain level of ignorance to survive. In order to work towards change, one must recognise a need for improvement. This requires an acknowledgement of lack, of something left wanting, of an imperfection, of an unhappiness. To be queer is to recognise that unhappiness and in that recognition become unhappy (Ahmed, 2010). For gay characters on network television this unhappiness is not permitted. *Will & Grace* was criticised for being a programme about gay characters that avoided gay political issues during its initial run:

Will & Grace had a decidedly gay sensibility, two openly gay characters, and relatively explicit references to gay sex, but the series carefully avoided representing same-sex physical intimacy and overtly political storylines. (Becker, 2006, 172)

Will's presence as an openly gay lead character on primetime network television could easily be seen as a political statement in and of itself, however NBC – wary of committing

to “gay TV” after the failure of *Ellen* – made it clear that *Will & Grace* was not a political programme (Becker, 2006). During the first eight seasons of the programme, only one romantic same sex kiss was shown just as the programme was ending. Political storylines were avoided and homophobia went largely unseen. A notable exception would be the season two episode *Acting Out*, where Will and Jack protest the censure of a gay kiss on television, joining a protest outside the network offices and eventually kissing as part of the protest. The episode was a clear nod to complaints about *Will & Grace*’s avoidance of same sex intimacy on screen – the network Will and Jack protest is their own: NBC – though the issue is never resolved. Instead the same sex kiss produced in the episode is a joke, an awkward interaction between two friends who we are repeatedly told have no attraction to each other.

The avoidance of gay issues also allowed NBC to distance itself from the failure of *Ellen* which was widely criticised for being “too gay”:

Of the twenty episodes of *Ellen* that aired after the main character came out, fifteen focused on lesbian storylines; of the first twenty episodes of *Will & Grace*, only one focused on a gay storyline. (Streitmatter, 2009, 117)

The ratings failure of *Ellen* showed the network that audiences, and advertisers, were not ready to embrace gay programming which focused primarily on gay issues, but the ratings success of *Ellen*’s “*The Puppy Episode*” (which featured Ellen’s coming out after a long press campaign) indicated that viewers were interested in seeing gay characters on screen (Becker, 2006). By making Will’s homosexuality a feature of his personality rather than an influence on his life, *Will & Grace* was able to harness the controversial buzz that a gay character would create whilst making the character’s gayness palatable for audiences and advertisers who did not want to take a political stance on gay rights. Will must remain disengaged from gay politics as he must remain happy for audiences to keep tuning in and for advertisers to keep making money. Audiences deserted *Ellen* for engaging too often with gay issues, and therefore bringing gay issues to the attention of a widespread network viewership (Becker, 2006; Tropiano, 2002; Streitmatter, 2009). By drawing attention to the problems gay Americans face, *Ellen* implied a need for change, shattering the illusion of happiness for the audience by shining a light on gay unhappiness. *Will & Grace*, however, glossed over such problems and instead portrayed a happy gay man whose sexuality rarely, if ever, impacted his life. Will is a successful, affluent lawyer who maintains a good relationship with his parents and wider family, has a close group of friends both gay and

straight, and has an active love life. He experiences none of the loneliness, illness, mental health problems or societal rejection that the gay characters of the 70s and 80s presented. His life is a happy one, his happiness existing alongside his gayness and his periods of unhappiness unrelated to his sexuality. In other words, *Ellen* strayed outside of network television's neoliberal constraints, leaning further left than was acceptable for NBC to maintain its apolitical, centrist image. *Will & Grace* however, allowed for gay representation within a neoliberal context, remaining stridently apolitical and therefore potentially enjoyable for audiences across the political spectrum⁹.

Sara Ahmed discusses the political importance of recognising queer unhappiness in her work *The Promise of Happiness*. She talks about how the unhappy queer ending allowed for many queer works to be published in times where they would otherwise have been banned. For Ahmed, queer unhappiness facilitates queer visibility, not only in its most basic sense – allowing queer characters to be seen – but also in the visibility of queerness rather than purely gayness – the acknowledgement of a gay politics and of a queer resistance to subjugation.

We can see too the importance of embracing the unhappy queer, rather than simply placing our hopes in an alternative figure of the happy queer. The unhappy queer is unhappy with the world that reads queers as unhappy. The risk of promoting the happy queer is that the unhappiness of this world could disappear from view. We must stay unhappy in this world. (2010, 105)

Strict adherence to presenting gay characters as happy risks ignoring the difficulties of living life as a queer person in the US. The erasure of homophobia from fictional characters' lives in favour of homonormative storylines in which gay characters' troubles are solved by finding love, getting married, and having children (as in *Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee*), may be intended to counteract decades of tragic gay narratives but may also have the (potentially intentional) consequence of presenting Marriage Equality as the solution to all gay problems, implying that all gay work has been done, and gay people can "settle down" and live "happily ever after". Rather than purely celebrating the possibility of gay happiness (even within a homonormative frame), Ahmed advocates for embracing queer unhappiness as a necessary form of political action, as a way of ensuring that which propagates queer unhappiness is seen and therefore able to be changed.

⁹ *Ellen's* position as a controversial, liberal leaning programme is, in 2019, now somewhat undermined by Ellen DeGeneres' decidedly neoliberal and centrist political stance.

Ahmed connects unhappiness with the idea of freedom, suggesting that recognising unhappiness, and allowing oneself to be unhappy, is a kind of emancipation from the work of maintaining happiness:

The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to be affected by what is unhappy, and to live a life that might affect others unhappily. The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would this mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation. (2010, 195)

By allowing for unhappiness, and recognising unhappy things, one allows space for paths other than that which are signposted as happiness bringers. One allows for the rejection of happiness, and therefore a rejection of happiness objects such as marriage and children. By giving space to unhappiness, one gives space to queerness itself. If network television were to allow for queer unhappiness, it would risk allowing space for political queerness on screen, upsetting the neoliberal balance needed to appeal to Americans across the political spectrum, and maintain the mass market appeal needed to fuel its economic model.

The revival series of *Will & Grace* strays further from the neoliberal “middle way” than the original series ever dared to, presenting a more aware *Will & Grace*, with episodes that engage much more extensively with politics and issues affecting the gay community. The revival itself was borne out of a renewed interest in the series as a political influencer, after the success of an online short entitled *#VoteHoney* in which the cast reunited in a short scene intended to encourage viewers to vote for Hillary Clinton (whose neoliberalism was widely criticised during the Democratic Primaries by more left leaning voters) in the 2016 elections. In the short, Will and Grace try to convince Jack to vote for Hillary as he is registered in a swing state and is yet to make up his mind. Karen plays the villain as a parodic Trump supporter. This short primed audiences for a more politically engaged *Will & Grace*, and its success reassured the network that audiences would respond well to this shift, in a new, changing political environment.

In the first episode of the revival series – *11 Years Later* – Will is flirting with his congressman despite their positions on different sides of the political aisle, and Grace is considering taking a job redecorating the Oval Office for the newly elected Donald Trump. Both Will and Grace struggle with choosing between the personal and the political – Will is attracted to his congressman and wants to secure a date with him, but fundamentally disagrees with his political stance, Grace knows that designing a White House interior

would be an important step in her career and would earn her a lot of money, but ultimately cannot stomach working for a president she abhors. By the end of the episode both Will and Grace answer to their political consciences. Will gives up on the idea of dating the congressman and Grace turns down the White House job. The final shot of the episode is inside the Oval Office where Grace has left a “Make America Gay Again” red hat atop the president’s chair, as a small act of political defiance (See fig. 15). This episode sets out a remit for the rest of the series. This is a new *Will & Grace* which isn’t afraid to engage with politics albeit in the context of a network sitcom, where structure and form demand that the characters’ situations remain the same, and commerciality requires a level of impartiality in order to retain a wide reaching audience. LGBTQ issues are not the focus here, rather the issues which Will and his congressman disagree on are specified as environmental. It is Grace who brings up gay rights with the leaving of the cap, and even then only in a gesture, not in words. Whilst positioning itself as categorically anti- Trump, *Will & Grace* also makes it clear that politics will not get in the way of their traditional sitcom dynamic. Whereas in real life, actress Debra Messing is vocal in her denouncing of Trump’s supporters, her character puts aside her political outrage to continue her friendship with Karen, who not only voted for Trump but is close personal friends with the First Family. Sitcom character Grace will not compromise her politics for professional gain, but will not lose her friendships over political affiliation. There is a limit here to which *Will & Grace* will allow its characters’ political allegiances to interfere with their personal lives – a limit which doesn’t exist in the real world outside of network television and sitcom structure.

With *11 Years Later*, *Will & Grace* disrupts its previous commitment to homonormativity, showing that it is no longer possible for LGBTQ Americans and their allies to live their lives without engaging in politics. Will and Grace are no longer able to put aside their political beliefs in order to prioritise personal gain – politics has in fact become unavoidably personal. Will’s political beliefs disrupt his personal relationships, and thwart his ability to pursue a romantic relationship. Political integrity here is shown as more important than finding someone to settle down with, a choice that seems directly influenced by the political climate in which it was made.

A more explicitly queer political storyline can be found in *Grandpa Jack* which centres on the issue of conversion therapy. The plot focuses on Will and Jack’s attempts to rescue Jack’s newly discovered grandson (Skip) from a conversion camp, and to try and convince Jack’s estranged son Elliot to accept his son’s potential homosexuality. By engaging with

issues that cause queer unhappiness – the enduring presence of conversion therapy for queer youth, and the familial rejection that almost always goes hand in hand with this – *Will & Grace* makes space for queerness itself. After succeeding in sneaking Skip out of the camp, Jack has a heart to heart with his grandson which emphasises the potential for a happy queer future, whilst also recognising the unhappiness and pain that Skip may have to endure in the present:

Jack: It was hard for me once too, but believe me it gets better.

Skip: I don't see how.

Jack: Skip you are going to invited to so many good dinner parties. And there's something else. When you get older, you'll understand that there's the family you were born into and the family that you choose. And the family that I chose, well it doesn't get any better than that.

Skip: But what will I do now?

Jack: I don't know. Your hero Will didn't really think this through. You're just going to have to be strong.

Skip: It's hard being me sometimes.

Jack: I know. But I'm going to be there for you as much as I can. And when I'm not, I want you to picture me in your head, looking at you like I am right now, and saying you are exactly who you are supposed to be.

(*Will & Grace: Grandpa Jack*, 2018)

This rare serious moment for Jack is a celebration of his life as a gay man, with a chosen family of friends. Jack doesn't tell his grandson that he'll find love, settle down, and get married. Instead the happiness objects Jack references are dinner parties, his community of friends, and the value of being himself. The concept of a "chosen family" deviates from the homonormative paths to happiness which value marriage and reproduction, instead prioritising community and common experience over biological ties and romantic love (Hull & Ortyl, 2019). Jack's happiness stems not from romantic fulfilment of homonormativity, but from his pride as a gay man and from the support of his friends. Jack's "It Gets Better" speech (a clear reference to the It Gets Better Campaign of 2010), doesn't reference marriage at all, or in fact any political gains made by the LGBTQ rights campaign. The advice he passes on to the next generation of gay youth is focused specifically on the individual

queer experience, and the aspects of gay life that are specific to the queer community, from stereotypical references to “dinner parties” to the common experience of growing up in a family that may not understand you. Homonormativity does not factor in, in fact, Jack advises against Skip assimilating at all, encouraging him to be “exactly who he is supposed to be”.

In order to promise Skip a happier future, Jack has to recognise his unhappy present. *Will & Grace* does not shy away from Skip’s reality as a gay child in a conservative household. Jack acknowledges that Skip’s life will be difficult and he will have to endure hardships in order to get to a place of happiness later in life. Ahmed writes “To narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down.” (2010, 107). By recognising Skip’s queer unhappiness, *Grandpa Jack* recognises the potential for change. By showing Skip’s life as a gay youth as hard, *Will & Grace* gestures to a world where his life could be easier, whether that be a happy future once he outgrows his conservative household, or a world where his parents accept his sexuality and celebrate their son for who he is. This recognition of the hardships of gay life is again indicative of a shift in *Will & Grace*’s and NBC’s willingness to address political issues. Skip’s line “It’s hard being me sometimes” is a simple acknowledgement that gay lives are not always happy ones, and yet it would likely not have featured in *Will & Grace*’s original series, during a time where gay people had far less legal rights and protections than they do now. This line, in 2018, recognises that all gay problems were not solved by Marriage Equality, and that the LGBTQ rights movement still has battles to fight. This willingness to reference queer unhappiness may also be a result of the political instability of the Trump era, where audiences are seen as more accepting of political storylines as politics is increasingly difficult to avoid in everyday life.

By the end of *Grandpa Jack*, Jack’s son Elliot has changed his mind about sending Skip to the conversion camp. He takes his son home, with the promise of trying to be more understanding. The episode ends with a moment of queer joy, when Elliot asks Jack if he would like to take his grandson to his first Broadway show, leaving Jack overcome with emotion. *Will & Grace* provides a queer happy ending for Skip and for Jack who has reconciled with his estranged son, and is comforted by the knowledge that his grandson will have a happier childhood. However, there is no further mention of the conversion camp, or the other children who are left there. The story as it pertains to Jack ends happily, wrapped up in a sitcom bow which restores the status quo by the end credits. The wider

issue of conversion therapy is not resolved. The children who don't have a gay family member to save them are left to suffer the abuses of the camp "Straighten Arrow". It would have been easy for *Will & Grace* to include a line about having the camp investigated or shut down, not doing so seems to be a direct choice. Sitcom structure constraints demand that the central story ends happily, that problems are resolved and the characters' lives are brought back to equilibrium (Mills, 2005). Therefore Jack's conversation with his son works. Elliot's homophobia is undone and he is easily able to convince his conservative wife to change her views. However, *Will & Grace* resists suggesting that all homophobia can be solved with a quick chat, leaving audiences with the knowledge that conversion therapy still exists and there are countless other families like Skip's whose issues aren't solvable with a twenty four minute episode of network television.

Though *Will & Grace* wears its liberal heart on its sleeve in many episodes of its revival series, it does not escape the neoliberal constraints of its network setting altogether. The episode *The Beefcake and the Cake Beef*, is a send up of the pending Supreme Court case "Masterpiece Cake Shop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission" which aims to stop businesses in the US from being able to refuse service to LGBTQ people on the basis of "religious exemption". In the episode Karen orders a cake from a bakery as a gift to Donald Trump for his birthday. She wants the cake to have his "MAGA" slogan iced on the top and the bakery refuses to complete the order as they disagree with Trump's politics. Grace sticks up for Karen, insisting that this is a free speech issue and though she may not agree with Karen or Trump, they both have the right to be served by the business. The episode takes a centrist view of the issue, foregrounding capitalism and free speech over the risk of legitimising neo-fascism. Grace's opinion is shown as correct, her equation of the rights of LGBTQ Americans and the rights of Trump supporters are never questioned, and she sticks to her guns, even when confronted by a group of Trump administration victim stand-ins (a disabled person, a Latinx immigrant, a trans man and a woman). Eventually, the baker relents and bakes the cake with the final scene showing that being known as the bakery that made a cake for Trump has in fact boosted business. The last joke of the episode sees Grace flirting with a man in front of her in the queue, who then complains to the baker that the swastika on his cake is askew. Grace rolls her eyes and says "Why are the hot ones always gay or Nazis?" (*Will & Grace: The Beefcake and the Cake Beef*, 2018). The existence of Nazis in America in 2018 is played for laughs, and the episode refuses to interrogate the thorny issue of free speech vs de-platforming fascism, instead presenting the issue as a simple one of liberal hypocrisy. This episode provides a right wing skewing counterpart to

the more liberal political episodes of the season's run, pushing *Will & Grace* back into a neoliberal space and making the show a safe choice again for the network which must appease its mass market base, and its advertisers who may well have skin in the Trump game. *The Beefcake and the Cake Beef* demonstrates that political engagement, even in this new era of political relevance and uncertainty, is difficult for networks to fully embrace, especially within a sitcom format whose primary aim is to make people laugh, not to make people think.

The unique timings of *Will & Grace* as a gay sitcom produced before and after both Marriage Equality and Trump's election, allows for a reading of the programme as a reflection of the shift in gay politics between the prevalence of a more assimilative "we're just like you" approach of the late 1990s/early 2000s (in the run up to Marriage Equality), and the queerer focus of the post Trump era. The direct attacks on the LGBTQ community coming from the Trump administration make it impossible for *Will & Grace* to take the same apolitical stance as it once had. Not only are audiences now willing to accept politics in their network programming, there is now an expectation that queer programming will engage with queer politics in recognition of television's impact as an instrument of social change – rather than just a reflection of it. In its revival series *Will & Grace* was challenged to meet the standard set by its original series run as influencer on LGBTQ rights. Former Vice President Joe Biden once said of *Will & Grace*:

I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public [on LGBT issues] than almost anything anybody has ever done so far. And I think people fear that which is different. Now they're beginning to understand. (Deschamps & Singer, 2017, 125)

If the original *Will & Grace* influenced America's opinions on same sex marriage during the fight for marriage equality, then the revival series must engage with the new challenges that LGBTQ Americans face under a Trump administration. Where the original series avoided political content in order to present a homonormative image of happy gay people who were "just like everyone else", the revival series takes a more direct approach, engaging with politics insofar as its sitcom constraints, and the restrictions of its neoliberal network home, will allow, to shine a light on some of the issues facing LGBTQ Americans and maintain its status as a programme that has a social conscience. This new approach to political content on network television requires and acknowledgement of queer

unhappiness, of queerness itself, and a disruption of the hegemonic myth of happy gay married couples whose problems were all solved with the passing of Marriage Equality.

Conclusion

Network television representations of gay and lesbian happiness have clearly been influenced by the prioritisation of Marriage Equality by LGBTQ rights campaigns, and the passing of Marriage Equality legislature by the Supreme Court decision of 2015. The connections that can be made between marriage, happiness and homonormativity allow networks to present gay characters in a way that upholds their neoliberal identity – giving gay audiences representations of gay characters achieving happiness, whilst reinforcing homonormative ideals of marriage and upholding heterosexist, capitalist institutions. I have argued that these representations have contributed to the narrative of Marriage Equality as the happy ending to the LGBTQ rights movement, implying that just as Callie's struggle to be accepted by her family is solved by her marriage in *Grey's Anatomy*, the LGBTQ community's quest for acceptance is solved by the success of the Marriage Equality campaign.

I have discussed how the connections formed by such representations position homonormativity as the only method of achieving happiness for gay and lesbian individuals, and the LGBTQ community as a whole. This privileging of marriage and homonormativity as a happiness bringer allows for a stigmatisation of queerness as the cause of unhappiness for gay and lesbian characters, as shown in my analysis of Connor's journey from queer casual sex and self-loathing, to happy, domestic, monogamy in *How to Get Away with Murder*. I have examined how the historic figure of the tragic homosexual has been replaced by representations of happy gay characters who conform to homonormative frames, and tragic queer figures whose deviation from Ahmed's "straightening devices" into queerness causes them to become unhappy – as in Oliver's HIV storyline.

I have also shown how further shifts in the US political climate during the Trump era have impacted on how network television engages with gay politics, disrupting the "happy ending" narrative of Marriage Equality and causing queer unhappiness to appear in places where it was previously unseen – as in *Will & Grace's* revival series. I have discussed how such representations of queer unhappiness can form the impetus for political action, and are therefore vital to the continued existence of an LGBTQ rights movement.

Where other works have analysed the development of gay and lesbian representation in a historical context (Becker, 2006; Streitmatter, 2009), I have focused specifically on Marriage Equality as a supposed turning point in the narrative of the LGBTQ rights

movement. Instead of discussing gay and lesbian representations as purely causes of social change or products of political shifts, I have instead contextualised these representations as a combination of both. Through analysing the political, social and economic context in which these representations exist, I have shown how network television reacts to societal changes and in turn influences that change. This thesis therefore contributes to discussions not just in television studies itself, but also in queer theory, and historical discussions of the LGBTQ rights movement.

Whilst this thesis has focused specifically on network television, it is important to note that alternative representations of gay and lesbian marriage can be found on cable television and on streaming services. These economics of these models work differently to network channels, allowing for programming which does not have to conform to neoliberal ideals, is able to appeal to a niche market instead of a mass American public, and can push boundaries further than network channels who rely upon advertiser revenue for their bottom line. For example, the Hulu – a streaming service in the US – production *The Handmaid's Tale* contains a subplot involving a lesbian who was separated from her wife and child during the country's overthrow by fascist forces. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Marriage Equality is rendered meaningless, as the character's legal marriage to her wife is no longer recognised by the fascist state, forcing her to stay in "Gilead" and become a handmaid, whilst her wife and son escape to Canada. Hulu's position as a streaming service allows for a representation of same sex marriage which is definitively not the solution to any problems, but in fact is a fragile right, which is easily rendered redundant if the circumstances allow. Netflix's sequel instalment of *Tales from the City* also presents an alternative view of marriage for its queer characters in a flashback episode where trans matriarch Anna Madrigal turns down the chance to get married and live a "normal" life when she realises her assimilation would mean turning her back on her queer community, and would require her renouncement of her queer identity and of her trans activism. Both these programmes aired after Trump's election in 2016, so it is worth questioning whether it is in fact their timing, alongside their economic freedoms as streaming services, which allows for these representations of marriage which counteract the narrative of Marriage Equality as "happy ending".

There is also much to research about how marriage is presented for LGBTQ characters who are not gay or lesbian – or not just gay or lesbian. I have not explored trans representations (such as Anna Madrigal in *Tales from the City*), gender non-conforming characters, or bisexual characters (though Callie from *Grey's Anatomy* is bisexual, her story is in the

context of a lesbian relationship). This is partially because such representations are few and far between on network television, but they do exist and their inclusion by network programming is increasing. Examinations of these types of queer character's relationship to marriage would prove interesting further study.

Similarly, the examples of gay and lesbian representations I have chosen to use here are of predominantly white, middle class characters. Though characters such as Callie from *Grey's Anatomy* and Santana from *Glee* are of Latinx descent, and Oliver from *How to Get Away with Murder* is Asian, their race does not intersect with the representations of their sexuality – aside from Callie and Santana's struggles to be accepted by their families for religious reasons which are loosely related to their Latin culture. Again, representations of non-white gay and lesbian characters on network television, which deal specifically with issues of race, and how racism intersects with homophobia, are not prevalent, though they can be found on cable channels and streaming services. Interesting points for further study in this area would be programmes such as *Queen Sugar* on OWN, *The Chi* on Showtime, *Pose* on FX, and *Boomerang* on BET, alongside streaming service programmes such as Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, *She's Gotta Have It*, and *Dear White People* all of which present black LGBTQ identified characters in programmes which focus in part on race.

As my thesis is grounded in historical context, it is clear that aspects of my research will change over time. For example, both *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Will & Grace* are due to air their final seasons in the latter half of this year. The ways in which these series deal with marriage at the end of their runs may well contradict what I have said about them here, especially as Connor and Oliver's wedding is set to feature in the final season of *Murder*. The changes I have mentioned as a result of the Trump administration's attempts to dismantle pro LGBTQ equality legislation may well continue, regardless of whether or not he is re-elected for a second term. Network television's approaches to programming may also change, as streaming services continue to dominate the market and pose a threat to more traditional means of watching TV. However, as a snapshot of this specific period of time, where Marriage Equality could easily have been portrayed as the end of LGBTQ rights campaigning as we know it, I believe my thesis to be successful in its connection of political movements and on screen representations, even if these connections are undermined by future storylines.

Through my discussion of the connections between happiness, homonormativity and Marriage Equality, I have demonstrated that the positioning of marriage as a bringer of

happiness to gay and lesbian characters implies that alternative ways of living are automatically unhappy. This privileges homonormativity, and demonises queerness, allowing for a silencing of queer voices and an erasure of LGBTQ lives which do not conform to homonormative ideals. Ahmed insists “we must stay unhappy in this world” (2010, 105) in order to continue the work of fighting for true equality, and I would argue that this statement also applies to representations on television. There must be unhappy gay characters on our screens, alongside gay characters who find happiness in queer spaces or in places outside of homonormative institutions. There must be space for queerness on network television, and for representations of same sex marriage which allow for unhappiness. We must not allow a representation of gay unhappiness as resolved by Marriage Equality to be perhaps the only representation of gayness a middle America family may see. We must instead provide a mass market gay representation which reflects the reality of the LGBTQ rights movement as far from over, and of Marriage Equality as far more complicated than merely “happily ever after”.

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Appendix

Fig. 1: Jack breaks the fourth wall in *11 Years Later...*

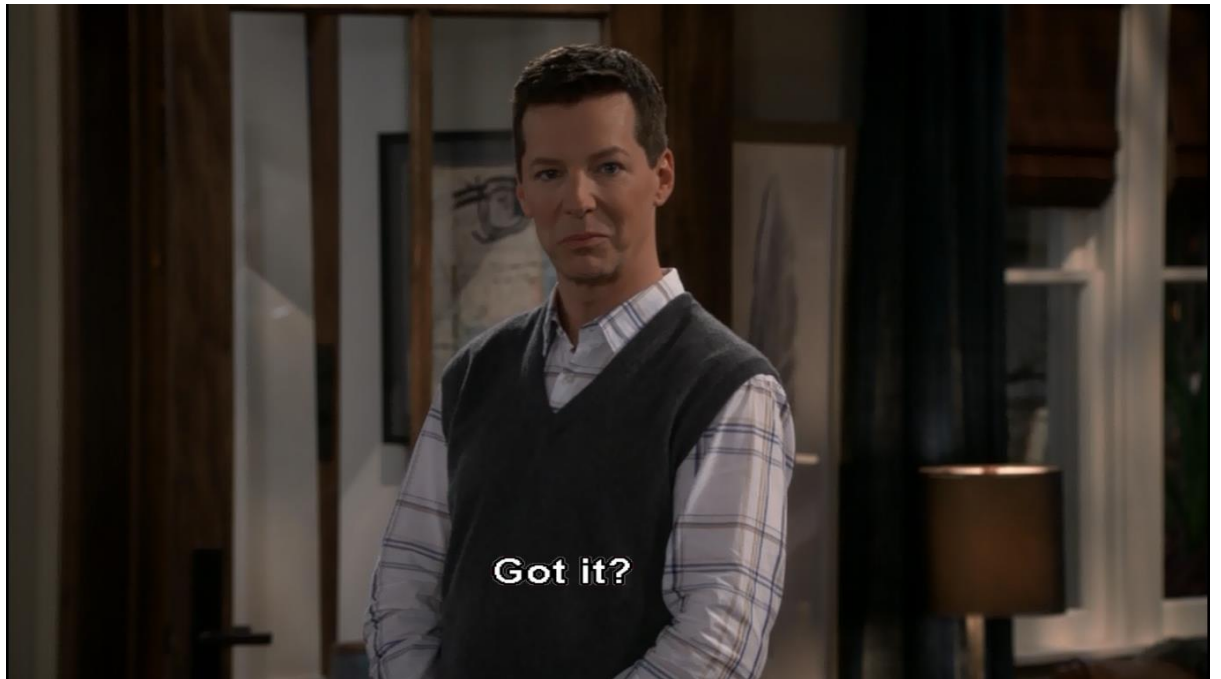


Fig. 2: Callie and Arizona's *White Wedding*



Fig. 3: Meredith and Derek's spontaneous courtroom wedding



Fig. 4: Christina stands alone in her white dress after being left at the altar



Fig. 5: Christina's realisation



Fig. 6: Christina struggles to breathe



Fig. 7: Meredith cuts off Christina's wedding dress



Fig. 8: Christina is held by Meredith, "her person", as she cries in relief at the cancellation of her wedding



Fig. 9: Arizona's unhappiness is reserved for before the wedding.



Fig. 10: Connor moves in with Oliver after they reconcile, forcing his way through the door.



Fig. 11: Connor stands in Oliver's bedroom doorway as he reveals his HIV diagnosis



Fig. 12: Oliver throws Connor out of his apartment after his infidelity



Fig. 13: Connor encounters a stranger at Oliver's door whilst trying to mend their relationship



Fig. 14: Connor has a panic attack on Oliver's doorstep



Fig. 15: Grace's small protest – a Make America Gay Again hat in the Oval Office.



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